

## Improving advance letters for major government surveys

White, Amanda; Martin, Jean; Bennett, Nikki; Freeth, Stephanie

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# Improving Advance Letters for Major Government Surveys

AMANDA WHITE, JEAN MARTIN, NIKKI BENNETT AND  
STEPHANIE FREETH

*Abstract:* This paper reports the latest results in a project examining the role of the advance letter in major government surveys. Results of cognitive interviews with members of the public showed that subjects preferred short letters. They wanted the letter to include the purpose of the survey, the name of the survey organisation, a simple statement about confidentiality, details of the interviewer's visit, and past survey results. Interviewers' views were sought using focus groups. Results from these stages were used to redesign the advance letters of the surveys. A three way split sample experiment was carried out on the Family Resources Survey, original letter versus new letter versus new letter plus leaflet. Preliminary results showed that response rates were slightly higher for the new letter compared to the original, but the new letter plus the leaflet did not show much of an increase on the original.

*Keywords:* advance letters, response rates, cognitive interviews, focus groups, split-sample experiment

## 1 Introduction

This report presents further findings from a project looking at the role of advance letters in the survey process that was first described at the 7th International Workshop on Household Survey Nonresponse (White and Freeth 1996). The project was set up because of concerns over falling response rates on several of the large scale continuous government household surveys carried out by Social Survey Division (SSD) of the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The aim of the project was to evaluate the current advance letters used on seven of our major continuous surveys<sup>1</sup> which are sent to all sampled addresses; to use information from the evaluation process to design improvements to the letters; and to test the improved letters designed to encourage people to co-operate with the survey request.

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<sup>1</sup> The National Travel Survey (NTS), the General Household Survey (GHS), the Family Expenditure Survey (FES), the Family Resources Survey (FRS), the National Food Survey (NFS), the Survey of English Housing (SEH), and the Omnibus Survey.

Response rates have been falling in spite of extra expenditure on measures to increase response, such as reissuing addresses not contacted during the original field period or extending the field period, and mirrors experiences in other survey organisations both in Britain and abroad (Steeth 1981; Lievesley 1986; Bradburn 1992). Trends in living patterns and attitudes have increased the problems faced by research agencies in obtaining acceptable levels of response in two main ways. It has become more difficult to find people at home, and it has become more difficult to persuade people, once contacted, to take part.

There are a number of ways of making contact with potential respondents on personal interview surveys to provide information about the survey and to persuade them to take part which depend partly on what information is available about the selected units. Most surveys carried out by ONS are based on a sample of addresses with no easy means of finding out the names or telephone numbers of respondents in advance so the main decisions are about what to send in writing before the interview, what the interviewer should cover verbally and what should be provided in writing when the interviewer calls.

There are three main reasons for sending a letter in advance of the interviewer's visit:

- to announce the visit of an interviewer;
- to give information about the survey;
- to stimulate the willingness of the respondent to participate in the survey.

When telephone calls are not feasible, only advance letters can cover the first of these. Information about the survey can be provided in a number of ways, so the issue here is what information should an advance letter provide and in what detail. The main means of persuading people to co-operate on surveys is personal contact with an interviewer. An advance letter can facilitate this by ensuring the respondent answers the door, listens to what the interviewer has to say and is positively disposed to take part. In addition, there is an SSD requirement to state formally to respondents that the survey is voluntary and that the information collected is confidential; in recent years it has been understood that such assurances must be provided in writing.

In SSD advance letters have been used routinely on all major surveys since 1987. Prior to this, experiments were conducted (Clarke et al. 1987) which showed that sending an advance letter improved response and was popular with interviewers. However, there has been little methodological investigation since into their effect on response, or into how the letters are viewed by either respondents or interviewers. Systematic evaluations of the effect of advance letters can be expensive to set up as they often require large split sample designs, with the sample being matched on variables such as area type, interviewer characteristics, respondent characteristics etc. Even then it is often very difficult to

attribute a difference in response rate to the effect of the letter. For this reason it was decided to use a variety of different approaches to take an in-depth look at the role of advance letters in the survey process.

Various criteria were used to evaluate the current letters used on the surveys:

- conformance with compliance principles known to encourage response
- intelligibility to respondents
- respondents' and interviewers' preferences on content and style
- effect on response

The project was carried out in a number of stages using different methods in combination:

- i) Asking respondents a short series of structured questions about the advance letter on a quantitative survey
- ii) Content analysis of current advance letters
- iii) Cognitive interviews with members of the public to evaluate new letters against old
- iv) Focus group discussions with interviewers comparing new and old letters
- v) Formal field test of new letters

The previous paper presented at the last nonresponse workshop described stages i) and ii) of the project. In summary, the findings from the Omnibus work suggested that respondents do not want a letter any longer than the current one; any redesigned letter should aim to explain the purpose of the survey more clearly, including more about the sorts of information collected, and the confidentiality statement should be made more convincing in some way. The content analysis (stage 2) revealed gaps and some inconsistencies in the letters currently in use and little explicit referral to compliance principles, described in detail in the previous article. This information served as a useful aid when drafting alternative versions of the letter to use in the cognitive test stage of the project.

This paper describes the findings from the cognitive interviews with members of the public (stage iii) and the focus group discussions held with interviewers (stage iv). These and earlier findings provided useful information for redrafting advance letters on the major government surveys conducted by SSD. The formal field test to evaluate the effect of the new letters is currently in progress.

## **2 Cognitive interviews with members of the public**

### **2.1 Method**

Luppés (1994; 1995) also used cognitive interviews to help analyse and improve the design of advance letters and our approach was based on his. The method can be used to investigate:

- reactions to a letter
- interpretation of a letter
- whether the intended message has been understood
- what information people would like to be provided
- the linguistic style people would prefer

Cognitive interviewing techniques are not designed for the simultaneous assessment of multiple versions of letters from a large number of surveys so it was decided to assess the letter from one survey only and use the information gained to aid the redesign of letters for the other surveys. The survey chosen was the National Travel Survey (NTS). This survey requires all members of the household to be interviewed and to keep a one week travel diary; all members must co-operate fully for the household to be counted as responding so anything that will encourage participation is of potential interest. Unlike the Family Expenditure Survey, which also involves diary keeping, no monetary incentive is offered. The original NTS advance letter is shown in the Appendix (letter A).

As well as using results from the content analysis and the structured interviews, the design of the alternative letters to be used in the experiment was influenced by a number of other issues. Informal discussions with field supervisors and interviewers revealed that most letters were thought to be too long, were not direct enough about the purpose of the survey and tried to give too much information. The general view was that the letters should provide the minimum necessary to encourage respondents to open the door to the interviewer; anything else was better covered by the interviewer on the doorstep or in a leaflet providing further information. However, because of the importance attached to the confidentiality statement, we were interested in exploring further what people understood by it and whether they believed it.

With these issues in mind two alternative versions to the original NTS letter, a short and a long version were designed (Appendix letters B and C). The short version was designed to cover the absolute minimum information needed in an advance letter and used a direct style with short sentences. The long version, while covering the same topics, went into more detail, particularly about confidentiality. It also included some previous results from the survey on the back of the letter. The alternative versions were designed to be distinctly different in style from the current letter, drawing on the findings of the earlier work and appealing to compliance principles. Figure 1 summarises the key features of the three letters.

**Figure 1: Key features of the letters used in the advance letters cognitive test**

Original-NTS letter	Short version	Long version
<b>Topics covered:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• survey organisation</li> <li>• survey sponsor</li> <li>• survey objective</li> <li>• information to be collected</li> <li>• confidentiality</li> <li>• participation is voluntary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• survey organisation</li> <li>• survey sponsor</li> <li>• survey objective</li> <li>• information to be collected</li> <li>• confidentiality</li> <li>• participation is voluntary</li> <li>• past survey results</li> <li>• the survey is used by organisations outside government</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• survey objective</li> <li>• information to be collected</li> <li>• confidentiality</li> <li>• participation is voluntary</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sampling procedure</li> </ul>		
<b>Compliance principles and tendencies invoked:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• helping tendency</li> <li>• request comes from an authority</li> <li>• feeling of uniqueness</li> <li>• reward is given or perceived</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• helping tendency</li> <li>• request comes from an authority</li> <li>• feeling of uniqueness</li> <li>• reward is given or perceived</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• helping tendency</li> <li>• request comes from an authority</li> </ul>		
<b>Distinguishing features:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• short</li> <li>• direct style</li> <li>• large print</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• detailed explanation</li> <li>• inclusion of past results</li> <li>• detailed confidentiality statement</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• long sentences</li> </ul>		

Eighteen individual interviews were carried out by a researcher trained in cognitive interviewing skills. Subjects were recruited into three groups with similar age and sex profiles. To ensure fair assessments, each group was given a different one of the three versions first. They were asked to read the letter and were asked questions about their comprehension using the 'retrospective probing' method (Willis 1994). They were then asked questions covering the following issues:

- overall impression of the letter
- perceived tone of the letter
- the information the letter was thought to provide
- the information the letter should provide
- use of additional material such as survey results

Finally the subjects were shown the two other versions of the letter and asked to compare all three. Interviews lasted about an hour and a half, and were tape recorded. Analysis was carried out of the transcriptions.

## **2.2 Results of cognitive interviews on NTS letters**

### *Understanding of the letters*

All three letters were understood by the subjects who could remember the main points; misinterpretations were rare and minor, although one person thought the letter was from the Department of Transport, one thought he had to ring the ONS number to make an appointment and one thought she was being asked to become an interviewer (but soon realised the misunderstanding).

### *Overall impressions*

Both the original letter and the long new version were thought too long; the short one was about right. The salutation "Dear Residents" was not liked as it suggested the letter was a circular. The original letter was the least popular. Subjects thought it too long and too officious, giving the impression the survey was compulsory. The opening sentence referring to the media suggested that they ought to have heard of the NTS when in fact no-one had. Several commented that telephone numbers were given in the wrong place. Subjects thought the confidentiality pledge was too wordy, raising rather than alleviating concerns about information disclosure. They thought the letter implied, the first contact by the interviewer would be by letter or phone rather than in person.

Although the short letter was thought to contain sufficient information and was preferred to the original letter, subjects disliked the short sentences and paragraphs, preferring the style of the long letter. This was the most preferred letter; subjects thought it clear and well laid out and liked the use of bullet points. They also liked the inclusion of past results. However, they did think it was too long and the print too small. Several people said they would like to select the best features of each letter and combine them to form their ideal letter.

### *Positive and negative expectations*

Advance letters can raise both positive and negative expectations about taking part in a survey so it is important to cultivate the former and reduce the latter. The cognitive interviews indicated that subjects had a number of concerns which would influence whether they took part in the survey. These are summarised below, with suggestions of how they might be addressed.

#### *Allaying concerns:*

- Concerns about ONS - give information about its functions that respondents will relate to (e.g. the Census, registration of births and deaths).
- Concerns about the sponsoring government department - explain how the results will be used, particularly to make improvements that might affect them.
- Concerns about confidentiality - need a statement that identifiable information will not be released but not as long winded as in the original letter or in the long version. Subjects understood that data would be published in aggregate form but few had thought about the release of anonymised microdata so they did not understand the reference to this in the long version; it raised more concerns than it allayed.
- Concerns about intrusion - provide details about the interviewer's visit. Subjects wanted a clear idea of what was involved in taking part in the survey. It should be made clearer that an interviewer will call in person rather than telephoning first.

#### *Increasing positive expectations*

The interviews also revealed ways in which people's positive expectations could be increased in order to raise positive feelings about participating in the survey:

- Emphasise the purpose and interest of the survey in a way that will appeal to respondents. Make it clear that everyone's experiences and views are important - so people who don't travel much feel it is still relevant to them.
- Appeal to compliance principles<sup>2</sup>, particularly altruism. However, the scarcity principle - saying 'you are representing thousands' - could backfire as people did not think they were capable of doing so or thought they were unlike anyone else. Something like: 'You are representing thousands of households with similar characteristics to yours' might be better.
- The ONS logo was important to give authority, together with the address and a contact number. But only one number should be given and placed in the body of the letter. (Problems were caused by using standard SSD letter paper which has a general inquiries number at the bottom.)

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<sup>2</sup> These are described in detail in the previous paper (see White and Freeth 1996).



- Voluntary nature of the survey - this has to be stated and most subjects thought this important.
- Signature on the letter - subjects thought the letter should be signed by someone at headquarters (not the interviewer). The term 'survey manager' was preferred to 'field officer' which had associations with the army or with the countryside.

#### *What should letters include?*

When asked what information they thought their ideal letter should include, the most common items mentioned were:

- the name of the organisation carrying out the survey;
- the purpose of the survey;
- details about the interviewer's visit;
- the information required;
- a statement saying the information would be treated 'in confidence';
- past results from the survey showing how the information is used.

### **2.3 Conclusions from the cognitive testing**

From the above results we concluded that the ideal letter should be quite short, conveying the main items of information required to allay concerns and encourage participation. Inclusion of past results was popular but these need not be included in the letter - a separate leaflet is a possibility.

The main recommendations were:

- Name the survey organisation and give a brief description of its responsibilities.
- Specify the purpose of the survey. If appropriate, raise respondents' interest by specifying improvements planned or made as a result of the survey.
- If appropriate, mention that the survey results can be used by organisations outside government.
- Avoid complicated confidentiality statements which refer to local authority areas.
- Provide details about the interviewer's visit.
- Appeal to respondent's helping tendency by suggesting that their participation would benefit society at large rather than the government.
- Give respondents the feeling that they are in a unique position by using statements such as "You are representing thousands of households with similar characteristics to yours".
- Provide one contact telephone number rather than two or three.
- Use direct line telephone numbers rather than the switch board number.
- Change the job title of the Field Work Co-ordinator to "Survey Manager".

It is important to recognise that although the views of potential respondents are important, they are not the sole determinants of what an advance letter should cover. The letters are only one aspect of the process of securing co-operation and the subjects interviewed just about the letters were not in a position to judge what should be left to interviewers to convey on the doorstep rather than in a letter. Interviewers' views about what the letters should include in order to facilitate their task on first contacting the address are also important, so the next stage of the project was to consult interviewers.

### **3 Focus groups with interviewers**

#### **3.1 Method**

While the preceding stages of the project were in progress, suggestions generated at regular interviewer support meetings had been passed to the research team. Together with the findings from the cognitive testing, these influenced the design of two further letters (D and E in the Appendix) which were sent out to nine interviewers who were invited to attend a focus group.

The first version (D) was a basic redesign of the letter to be sent out by headquarters. The second (E) consisted of two elements: a short letter to be sent out by HQ in advance of fieldwork and a longer letter to be sent out by interviewers at the start of the field period.

#### **3.2 Results from the interviewer focus groups**

Although interviewers thought both letters were an improvement on the current advance letters, they had further comments and suggestions for improvement. The main comments and recommendations that emerged from the focus groups were:

- Both versions D and E were considered too long, too ponderous and too officious.
- Version D could be much shorter by omitting how and by whom the results are used; the interviewer can provide this information on the doorstep.
- Version E: many interviewers deliver their own personalised notes which they adapt to specific circumstances; some give their telephone numbers so the informant can contact them. On balance, it was felt that the current system worked well and the proposed letter in version E was rather inflexible.
- The inclusion of the crown on the headed paper was much appreciated.
- The sentence about 'you can help us to produce reliable statistics which everyone can use to understand what is going on in our society' was liked and interviewers felt it should be used in the new letters.

- Details of how addresses are selected should be left to interviewers to deal with as this could easily be misunderstood by informants.
- It is important to make an impact in the first few sentences as many people don't read the letters beyond a certain point.
- Keep the letter short and simple as this provides less for people to take exception to and call HQ to refuse.
- The key points to mention in the advance letter are:
  - who ONS is (and mention the Census);
  - what the survey is about (briefly);
  - introduce the interviewer's visit;
  - mention the interviewer's ID card;
  - ask them to show the letter to others in the household;
  - stress that their participation is important;
  - the survey is confidential (but keep the statement simple);
  - the survey is voluntary (this must be included);
- Leave people wanting to know more; allow the interviewer to play a bigger role in gaining response - people are less likely to turn down a friendly face than a detailed letter.
- Avoid using the term 'survey' too often and replace with 'study' or 'research'.
- Use even bigger typeface.
- Remove 'The Resident' from the address label to encourage people to open the envelope.

Prior to the focus group a couple of the interviewers due to attend had drafted their own versions of advance letters. These were discussed by the group and several features of these letters were adopted. In particular, interviewers wanted a statement to help authenticate their visit, mentioning that their ID card carries their photograph and the ONS logo. They also wanted to reassure people that if they were not in when the interviewer first called or were busy, the interviewer would be happy to call again. This would help emphasise the importance of co-operation.

### *Survey leaflets*

Interviewers expressed mixed views about whether we should enclose leaflets with advance letters giving more detail about the survey and presenting some results. This procedure is currently used on the Labour Force Survey. Many felt that the leaflets are a useful tool for them to have in their armoury that helps them gain response. A leaflet is often left by the interviewer at a reluctant household and he/she will return later to try to gain response. In addition, the leaflet is often left at addresses where no contact has been made together with a note to say that the interviewer has called and that he/she will return. Some interviewers were sceptical about whether people would read the leaflet if it was

sent out with the letter. Others felt that a letter and leaflet may overload the informant and they may be more inclined to refuse to HQ. However, this has not been the experience on the LFS. We therefore need to do some methodological work in the field to explore the effect of sending leaflets with the letters on interviewers' behaviour and on response.

## **4 Field trials**

### **4.1 Method**

Based on all the preceding work a final version of the letter (F in the Appendix) was drawn up to test in the field. Ideally we would have liked to carry out a split sample test of this letter against the original letter on the National Travel Survey, on which so much of the work had taken place. However, for a variety of reasons it was not possible to use this survey for an experiment so the new letter was adopted without further testing.

On the basis of the research described here advance letters for all the other major surveys were redesigned and in general there was little enthusiasm for allowing experimental comparisons with the original letters. However, we have done a number of things to evaluate how well the letters appear to be working in the field. We have obtained feedback from interviewers about how well they think the new letters are working and are monitoring the number and nature of calls to HQ in response to the letters as well as overall response rates.

It was agreed to conduct a three-way split sample trial of the advance letter on one survey, the Family Resources Survey. The three elements are:

- original letter
- new letter
- new letter plus survey leaflet

Under the first two conditions interviewers have copies of the survey leaflet to use at their discretion when they visit the address; under the third condition a leaflet is sent with the letter in advance of the interviewers' visits. The split sample trial is being carried out for three months, June - August 1997, covering a sample of around 2,000 households per month.

### **4.2 Results from the field trials**

The field trials started in June 1997 so final results are not yet available. Results to date are presented below.

## **General observations**

### *Feedback from interviewers*

All interviewers working on surveys which introduced new advance letters in June or July 1997 were asked to complete an evaluation form giving their views on the letter. Views were obtained from over 230 interviewers. Interviewers reported that the public had few specific comments to make about the letters. Of the few comments received most were positive, remembering the letter, particularly the payment for taking part in the FES. The interviewers' overwhelming impressions were that the new letters were much improved on the old. They particularly liked the short length, the clear, concise nature, and the overall 'official' look created by the crest and the ONS logo at the top of the paper. They did not think that the letter had actually improved response directly but felt it had paved the way for them to approach the household and gain co-operation.

We deliberately involved interviewers in this project; we listened to their criticisms and ideas and sought their opinions in redesigning the letters. Although it is somewhat intangible to measure, the motivation of interviewers does seem to have improved as revealed by their favourable comments. They feel that staff in HQ have listened to their problems and done something about them. One should not underestimate the effect that this can have on their enthusiasm and performance in their jobs and hence on obtaining high response.

### *Telephone calls to HQ*

One criticism of using advance letters is that they give survey respondents the opportunity to refuse direct to HQ by telephone before the interviewer ever has a chance of a face-to-face contact where she/he can try and persuade those that are reluctant. Thus it was important to monitor telephone calls to HQ when the new letters were introduced to ensure that there was no dramatic rise in this type of refusal. There has been no evidence to date that either the number or nature of the calls were any different to previously.

### *Response rates*

Obviously the new letters were designed to improve response rates. Although it is virtually impossible to attribute any change in response directly to the letters we wanted to make sure that response had not changed dramatically in a negative direction since their introduction. To date we only have final response rates available for June which show little difference from those obtained throughout the last 12 months. Interestingly the only survey which showed any substantial difference was the NTS: the response rate for June 1997 was 73% which was the highest since September 1996 (75%) and at least 3 percentage points higher than the previous eight months (range 67% - 70%). It is too early to draw any firm conclusions other than the new letters do not appear to be having any adverse effect.

**Split sample trial on the FRS**

Again response rates for only one of the three months of the split sample trial are available. Response rates for June are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Response rates on the Family Resources Survey by type of advance letter**

	June 1997		
	Original letter	New letter	New letter + leaflet
	%	%	%
<b>Response</b>	69	71	69
<b>HQ Refusals</b>	2	2	2
<b>Refusals to interviewer</b>	26	24	26
<b>Total Refusals</b>	28	26	28
<b>Non-contact</b>	3	3	3
<b>Base</b>	967	949	913

As can be seen from Table 1 the sample that received the new letter had a slightly higher overall response rate than either that which received the original letter or the new letter plus the survey leaflet, 71% compared with 69%. This difference was due to a lower level of refusals to the interviewer. It is too early to draw any general conclusions but again the new letter does not appear to be having a detrimental effect.

Interviewers were asked how they felt about a leaflet, explaining the purpose of the survey and giving some results, being sent out with the advance letter. Interestingly, about half the interviewers felt it was a good idea but a substantial minority (a quarter) thought it was best left for the interviewer to handle and give out when she/he felt it was most appropriate, usually at the end of the interview.

## 5 Conclusions

The results so far indicate that the interviewers are certainly pleased with the new letters much preferring them to the old versions and hence the letter has had the effect of motivating them in their job of obtaining high response to government surveys. As yet no detrimental effect on overall response rates has been observed but we must still monitor results over the next few months. There is a question mark over whether to send a leaflet

of results in advance with the letter, interviewers working on the FRS have divided opinions over this and we must await the remaining response results on the split sample trial.

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## Annexes: Copies of letters

- Letter A Original NTS letter
- Letter B New short version letter for cognitive interviews
- Letter C New long version letter for cognitive interviews
- Letter D Short letter for focus group
- Letter E Long letter for focus group
- Letter F Final letter for field trials

Letter A Original NTS letter



Social Survey Division

Our Ref: NTS

Date:

Dear Resident(s)

You may have read in the newspapers or heard on the radio or television references to the National Travel Survey. This is one of the major sources of information used by the Department of Transport when considering national policy and use of resources in such fields as public transport, road building and railways. It is a survey carried out every year to provide the Department with facts and figures about travel in Britain.

This month your address is one of those selected randomly from the Post Office's list of addresses. I am therefore writing to ask for your help.

We are interested in such things as whether or not people travel, which methods of transport they use and how much it costs them.

Within the next few weeks, one of our interviewers will call on you. The interviewer will show an official identification card, explain the survey to you in more detail and ask to talk to each adult in your household. If you happen to be busy when the interviewer calls he/she will be happy to call again.

The information you give is treated in confidence. The Office for National Statistics does not release this information in any way in which it can be associated with your name or address. No identifiable information about you or your household will be passed to other government departments, local authorities, members of the public or press.

We rely on people's voluntary co-operation, which is vital if the survey is to be successful. By taking part in this survey you will be assisting the Department of Transport and the Transport and Road Research Laboratory which use the results. We are very grateful for your help.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Tom Tattan'.

Tom Tattan  
Field Officer  
National Travel Survey

For further information please contact me at the ONS address below or telephone me on 0171-533-5427 (Direct Line) or 0171-233-9233 Ext 5427 (ONS Switchboard). Work on this survey will start on or after the 1st of this month.

NTS-EB.96



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**Letter B New short version letter for cognitive interviews**

Social Survey Division

Our ref:

Date:

Dear Residents,

**NATIONAL TRAVEL SURVEY**

I am asking for your help on the National Travel Survey. This is being carried out by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the official government research organisation.

The information on this survey is collected for the Department of Transport. The Department of Transport is responsible for:

- travel safety (including pedestrians)
- providing money for road building, railways, and other types of transport (buses, cycling)

We are interested in how much travelling people do, the cost of travel and how they get to work, to the shops or to school. By helping our interviewer, you will be assisting the Department of Transport and the Transport And Road Research Laboratory to understand and improve travel provision and safety.

You are representing thousands of other households, therefore your participation is extremely important. One of our interviewers will contact you and will be pleased to answer questions about the survey.

The information you give will be treated in strict confidence. Your answers will only be used for statistical purposes, so no one can identify you or your family.

The National Travel Survey asks about your own experiences. People who take part in this voluntary survey find it enjoyable and interesting. By taking part, you will be making a contribution which will benefit everyone.

If you want to know more about the survey, please call me on 0171-396-2283 (direct line).

Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Tom Tattan  
Survey Manager, National Travel Survey

Letter C New long version letter for cognitive interviews



Social Survey Division

Our ref:  
Date:

Dear Residents,

**NATIONAL TRAVEL SURVEY**

I am asking for your help on the National Travel Survey. This is being carried out by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the official government research organisation.

The information on this survey is collected for the Department of Transport. The Department of Transport is responsible for:

- travel safety (including pedestrians)
- providing money for road building, railways, and other types of transport (buses, cycling).

We are interested in how much travelling people do, the cost of travel and how they get to work, to the shops or to school. By helping our interviewer, you will be assisting the Department of Transport, the Transport And Road Research Laboratory, and other non-government organisations who use your results to understand and improve travel provision and safety.

People's travel varies according to their age, occupation, where they live etc. So we need to talk to all sorts of people therefore your participation is extremely important. One of our interviewers will call at your address during the next 8 weeks. The interviewer will:

- show you ONS's official identity card
- answer any questions you have about the survey
- call during the evening if you are not at home during the day

We never reveal the names and addresses of participants to anyone outside the research teams in ONS working on this survey. No survey results that record people's local authority area, and which might therefore stand some small chance of being identified with them or their households, are ever made available to local councils, the press, or members of the public. Such results are only available to the research staff of government departments and reputable research institutes who need to use statistics from the survey. Again I should emphasise that we pass on such results only for genuine research purposes and without names or addresses.

The National Travel Survey asks about your own experiences. People who take part find the survey enjoyable and interesting. Although the survey is voluntary, your help is very important to us. By taking part, you will be making a contribution which will benefit everyone.

Some of the results of previous National Travel Surveys are presented on the back of this letter. If you want to know more about the survey, please call me on 0171-396-2283 (direct line). Thank you very much for your help in this important survey.

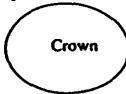
Yours sincerely,

Tom Tattan  
Survey Manager, National Travel Survey

**Reverse side of Letter C****Results from previous National Travel Surveys**

- Nowadays people travel nearly four times as far, on average, as they did in 1950.
- On average people spend about as much on travel within Great Britain, as they do on housing.
- About one in five pensioners say that they have difficulty using buses.
- The average distance travelled by children between home and school is 1.9 miles.
- In 1994, 67% of car mileage was completed by cars using unleaded petrol or diesel fuel, compared with 53% in 1992.
- Sixty six per cent of workers in Great Britain usually travel to work by car, but only 18% of those working in Central London do so.

**Letter D Short letter for focus group**



Office for National Statistics  
1 Drummond Gate  
LONDON SW1 2QQ  
Tel: [field office direct line no.]

The Residents  
XX Any Road  
Any Town  
Any County  
Post code  
extra line for address  
extra line for address  
extra line for address  
extra line for address

Our ref: XXS

Dear Sir/Madam,

**National Travel Survey**

I am writing to ask for your help with the National Travel Survey. By collecting information on people's own experiences, this voluntary study provides important facts and figures about travel in Britain. The findings are used widely - e.g. by government, charities, independent researchers, students in schools and universities - and are often commented upon in the press and on television.

We are the government office that carries out social research amongst the population as well as being responsible for organising the Census and the registration of births, deaths and marriages. Like the Census, the information you give will be treated in strict confidence. Your answers will be used only for statistical purposes, so no one can identify you or your household.

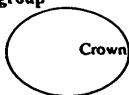
You are representing thousands of similar households so your participation is extremely important. By taking part you can help us to produce reliable statistics which everyone can use to understand what is going on in our society.

In the next few weeks one of our interviewers will write to tell you more about the study. In the meantime if you want to talk to somebody about the survey, please call me on 0171 533 XXXX (direct line).

Thank you in advance for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Field Officer's name  
Survey Manager

**Letter E Long letter for focus group**

The Residents  
 XX Any Road  
 Any Town  
 Any County  
 Post code  
 extra line for address  
 extra line for address  
 extra line for address  
 extra line for address

Office for National Statistics  
 1 Drummond Gate  
 LONDON SW1 2QQ  
 Tel: [field office direct line no.]

Our ref: XXS

Dear Sir/Madam,

### National Travel Survey

I am an interviewer from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) - the government office that carries out social research amongst the population as well as being responsible for organising the Census and the registration of births, deaths and marriages. A few weeks ago, Tom Tattan from my office wrote to invite your household to take part in the National Travel Survey (NTS). Now I would like to tell you more about how you can help with this voluntary study.

The NTS provides important facts and figures about travel in Britain which are used, for example, by the Department of Transport (DoT), charities, independent researchers, and students in schools and universities. The results have been used to:

- plan cycle lanes and safety facilities for pedestrians
- identify the sorts of vehicles that cause the most pollution
- monitor the take up of concessionary fares (59% of elderly people currently have a bus pass)
- find out about why people used (or don't use) public transport.

I will be visiting you in the next few days to make an appointment to talk about your own travel experiences. Just in case you are not at home when I call, please show this letter to other people in your household so they know I will be coming.

Everything you tell me will be treated in strict confidence. Your answers will be used only for statistical purposes by researchers at ONS and the DoT who sponsor the study. No identifiable information about your household will be passed to another government department, local councils, the press or members of the public.

By taking part you can help us produce reliable statistics which everyone can use to understand what is going on in our society.

Thank you in advance for your help. I look forward to meeting you.

Yours sincerely,

[Interviewer to insert name and authorisation number here]

**Letter F Final letter for field trials**



Social Survey Division  
Office for National Statistics  
1 Drummond Gate  
London SW1V 2

January 1997

THE COTTAGE  
1 SMITH DRIVE  
JONESTOWN  
KENT  
BR3JHR

NTS 12345 678

Dear Resident,

You have been chosen to take part in the **National Travel Survey** - a survey about people's own experience with travelling in Great Britain. This research is being carried out by the **Office for National Statistics** for the Department of Transport .

Your address has been selected at random and one of our interviewers will contact you in the near future to explain the study in more detail. You may want to show this letter to other people in your household just in case the interviewer calls when you are not at home. If you are busy when the interviewer calls he/she will be happy to call again.

All our interviewers carry an official identification card which includes their photograph and the National Statistics logo as it appears at the top of this letter. Everything you tell us will be treated in confidence.

It is important to the success of this study that everyone chosen takes part. We rely on people's voluntary co-operation to produce official statistics to help everyone understand what is happening in our society. For further information please call 0171 533 5427 (direct line). Work on this survey starts on or after the 1st of *[month]*.

Thank you in advance for your help.

Yours sincerely,

**Tom Tattan**  
Survey Manager