

Australian Bureau of Statistics
Regulator Performance Framework
Assessment Report, 2016–17

Introduction

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

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

In consultation with key stakeholders, the ABS developed performance metrics to demonstrate compliance with the government's Regulator Performance Framework (RPF). The ABS' first self-assessment of performance against these measures was produced with respect to the 2015-16 financial year, with an overall amber rating. This report is ABS' second self-assessment against the RPF, and covers the 2016-17 financial year.

ABS transformation

The ABS is midway through a major transformation. New opportunities, and challenges, are being presented by the rapid change in the volume of available data and the way this data is acquired and disseminated. To respond, the ABS has embarked on a significant transformation of the organisation and its statistical business to provide the capability and infrastructure to continue to better meet the statistical requirements of Australia within constrained resources and with minimal provider burden.

This transformation will enable the ABS to continue to engage better with partners and develop more responsive solutions, making best use of current and emerging technologies

2016 Census of Population and Housing

On 27 June 2017 the first data from the 2016 Census of Population and Housing was released - this was thanks to the overwhelming support and participation of the Australian public. Over 95 per cent of Australia's occupied households completed the Census, comparable to the 2006 and 2011 Censuses.

A total of 4.9 million online submissions and 3.5 million paper forms were submitted, equating to 63.3% of participants completing their Census form online. The digital first approach made Census information faster and easier to process and contributed to a higher-quality data set. The time taken for the average household to complete the Census online was significantly reduced from 37 minutes in 2011 to 26 minutes in 2016. The introduction of the digital-first approach also saved taxpayers over \$100 million dollars.

The ABS implemented special strategies to increase the coverage of specific populations to ensure everyone could participate fully and easily in the Census, including people with disabilities, people experiencing homelessness as well as remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.




In addition, the 2016 Census represented the largest ever national culturally and linguistically diverse Census campaign. Campaign materials were translated into up to 35 languages across multiple platforms. The ABS connected with more than 120 multicultural organisations and organised 32 media and community briefings and information sessions for culturally and linguistically diverse groups across Australia, including sessions on how to complete the 2016 Census. The campaign proved incredibly successful with particularly high online response rates for people born in China (90.0%), India (85.4%) and Malaysia (82.4%). The campaign also contributed to a reduced net undercount for most overseas countries of birth compared with the 2011 Census, with the largest changes seen in those born in China (6.2% net undercount in 2016 down from 14.9% in 2011) and India (5.0% net undercount down from 9.7% in 2011).

The comprehensive range of checks undertaken by the ABS and the Independent Assurance Panel has confirmed the quality of the 2016 Census data and the data is already being used to inform important decisions by governments, by businesses, by communities and by households.


High level summary and conclusion

The ABS continually seeks to minimise the burden imposed on households and businesses through the collection of data while maintaining the capacity to properly inform Australia's important decisions by partnering and innovating to deliver relevant, trusted, objective data, statistics and insights. This section provides a high level summary and rating of ABS performance against 6 KPIs, as well as an overall rating for the 2016-17 reporting period.


The following traffic light system has been used:

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


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

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


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

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


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

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


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


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

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

Overall rating for sub-KPI 1.1 is  'Good'.

Evidence 1.1.1	Evidence source	Outcome
Resources allocated to engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in each state and territory.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Indigenous engagement managers and officers list on the ABS website. Round Table on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics meets at least annually. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> List maintained in 2016-17. Round Table on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders met 10-12 April 2017.
Evidence 1.1.2	Evidence source	
Accessible and transparent process available for respondents to seek exemption from a survey due to specific circumstances.	Survey Participant Information web pages are: up to date; meet Government accessibility standards; and exemption information is easy to locate.	Improved since last year's report, refer to ABS Surveys Charter (see comment*)
Evidence 1.1.3	Evidence source	
Environmental scanning is undertaken regularly and at a minimum, on an annual basis.	The following consultation forum meetings will be held: three of the Australian Statistics Advisory Council; at least four of the State Government Statistical Priority Forum; two of the Australian Government Statistical Forum; at least two Economic Statistics Advisory group meetings; and two Population and Social statistics Advisory group meetings. (Target 1.3, Annual Performance Statement, 2016-17 in ABS Annual Report, Chapter 4)	Refer to Target 1.3, Annual Performance Statement, 2016-17 in ABS Annual Report, Chapter 4

*[The Australian Bureau of Statistics Regulator Performance Assessment Report, 2015–16](#) (the 2015-16 report) gave sub-KPI 1.1 a rating of , or 'satisfactory, but with some aspects for improvement identified'. This amber rating related to evidence 1.1.2 'accessible and transparent process available for respondents to seek exemption from a survey due to specific circumstances' on the grounds that the specific process to follow to request an exemption needed to be clearer. The ABS has undertaken a comprehensive review of exemption guidelines resulting in an improved level of clarity of process. The ABS is pleased to report that website information has been updated to include clearer guidance regarding exemptions.

Evidence 1.1.3 comment: The 2015-16 self-assessment proposed to revise the evidence source for 1.1.3 (Environmental Scans) for future reports. The evidence source for 1.1.3 is now the ABS' Annual Performance Statement (APS) target 1.3 (linked in the table), which quantifies the level and broad range of consultation undertaken annually by the ABS.

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

Overall rating for sub-KPI 1.2 is  'Satisfactory'.

Evidence 1.2.1	Evidence source	Outcome
Avoidance of duplication in business collections conducted by official bodies for statistics purposes.	Statistical Clearing House annual report on the NSS website. Statistical Clearing House section from Corporate governance chapter (5) in ABS Annual Report, 2016-17 .	Refer to comments below and note: new evidence proposed for 2017-18 – refer to comment below table.
Evidence 1.2.2	Evidence source	
Complaint resolution performance meets ABS Surveys Charter standards.	New evidence to be obtained direct from NDAC	Target partially met as 88% of written queries/ complaints were sent written advice of the outcome within 28 days – refer to comment below table.

Evidence 1.2.1 comment: The Statistical Clearing House (SCH) was established within the ABS by a Prime Ministerial mandate, as the mandatory central clearance point for business surveys that are run, funded, or conducted on behalf of the Australian Government. Its goal was to promote good survey practice and minimise respondent burden by minimising the load placed on businesses by Australian Government surveys, reducing unnecessary survey duplication, and ensuring surveys are fit-for-purpose. In 2016–17, 161 surveys were submitted for clearance. Of these, 75 received a full SCH review and approval, 19 were exempt from full review, 12 were cancelled by agencies after submission, 22 were still being reviewed, and 33 were out of scope of SCH review. Surveys categorised as "Exempt from full review" are those where the overall respondent burden is considered minimal.

The Statistical Clearing House was disbanded as of 31 August 2017. With a view to finding efficiencies and ensuring that we prioritise our activities to fit with the declining ABS budget, the ABS plans to adopt a different operating model to meet this goal. Going forward, Commonwealth agencies will be directly responsible for minimising survey burden on business, with the ABS providing support by making [materials](#) available to assist survey development and through an optional user pays advisory service. The final annual report, covering 2016-17, has been used for this self-assessment however a new evidence source is proposed for 2017-18 onwards.

Evidence 1.2.2 comment: In 2016-17 the ABS responded to 938 written queries or complaints. Of that, 716 were from businesses seeking exemption from participation in the ABS Survey Program. The ABS does at times provide general exemptions from surveys to small businesses in certain circumstances. The remaining 222 came from household providers. Some business and household providers can be granted temporary exemptions on compassionate grounds.

On average, the ABS responded to written queries and complaints within 8 days of receipt of the correspondence with 88% being sent written advice of the outcome within 28 days^{1,2}. All written queries and complaints were responded to by the ABS.

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

² The ABS Survey Charter stats that ABS will advise the outcome of complaints within 4 weeks.

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

Overall rating for sub-KPI 1.3 is  'Good'.

Evidence 1.3.1	Evidence source	Outcome
Products, services and tools are available and improved to assist providers to meet their obligations.	Annual Performance Statement targets 3.3 and 3.4 (Annual Report Chapter 4).	Business take up of electronic forms was 80% and 63% of the population completed their Census using an electronic form.

KPI 1 overall rating is  'Satisfactory'.

Specific areas for improvement

Evidence 1.2.2 "Complaint resolution performance meets ABS Surveys Charter standards" was partially met. While all written queries and complaints were responded to, not all were within 28 days as per the charter. In 2016-17 the ABS experienced an increase in the number of written queries/complaints, in part due to the 2015-16 Agricultural Census. In addition, many of the correspondence related to complex issues requiring investigation. The 2016-17 experience will be used to improve future planning of resources dedicated to investigating and responding to written queries and complaints.

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

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

Overall rating for sub-KPI 2.1 is  'Good'.

Evidence 2.1.1	Evidence source	Outcome
Information is accessible and concise on the ABS website for survey participants on their frequently asked questions.	Covered by 1.1.2	Refer to 1.1.2
Evidence 2.1.2	Evidence source	Outcome
Accessible and transparent process available for respondents to seek exemption from a survey due to specific circumstances.	Covered by 1.1.2	Refer to 1.1.2
Evidence 2.1.3	Evidence source	Outcome
The ABS provides information to respondents on importance of data being collected, why collected, and how it is used.	Survey specific information provided to respondent.	Detailed information about the purpose, objectives and main users of specific ABS surveys is available either via the ABS theme pages, in the form of guide material produced for each survey or by contacting the help number listed on the survey questionnaire. Example: Purpose, objectives and main users of the ABS Innovation Survey.

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

Overall rating for sub-KPI 2.2 is  'Good'.

Evidence 2.2.1	Evidence source	Outcome
Resources allocated to engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in each state and territory.	Same as 1.1.1	Refer to 1.1.1
Evidence 2.2.2	Evidence source	Outcome
Proposed initiatives likely to lead to significant changes in regulator burden due to changes in policies, practices or services	1. Information gathered during the biannual internal process to identify changes in provider burden. (Annual	1. Refer to comment below table. 2. Target Met.

standards are circulated to relevant stakeholder consultation groups (including but not limited to such groups as Careers Australia, National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, Small Business Ministerial Advisory Council, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Australian Business Economists, Australian Bankers Association, Minerals Council of Australia) for feedback prior to implementation.	Performance Statement target 3.1 (Annual Report Chapter 4) 2. Evidence source 1.1.3	
---	--	--

Evidence 2.2.2 comment: The ABS routinely consults with stakeholders to ensure that they are aware of and approve any changes that are made to collections. During 16-17 a decision was made to increase content in the Survey of International Investment to better service government information needs. While this led to an overall increase in regulatory burden in 2016–17 of \$285,877, this change was made in consultation with key stakeholders.

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

Overall rating for sub-KPI 2.3 is  'Good'.

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

KPI 2 overall rating is  'Good'.

Communication with regulators is clear, targeted and effective.

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

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

Overall rating for sub-KPI 3.1 is  'Good'.

Evidence 3.1.1	Evidence source	Outcome
ABS methods of respondent engagement, and information available regarding obligation to respond and value of response, leads to requests for exemptions from surveys at or below 0.5% of households and businesses selected for ABS surveys.	Calculated from exemptions and response rate figures.	Only a very small percentage (less than 0.5%) of the businesses and households selected in ABS surveys write to the ABS to question or complain about their participation in an ABS survey.

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

Overall rating for sub-KPI 3.2 is  'Good'.

Evidence 3.2.1	Evidence source	Outcome
ABS surveys adopt target response rates, proportionate to regulatory risk and commensurate with fit for purpose statistics.	Survey Participant Information on ABS website. (Previously Annual Performance Statement criterion 12 (Annual Report 2015-16 Chapter 4))	Refer to Survey Participant Information – Business FAQs and Current Household Surveys .
Evidence 3.2.2	Evidence source	
Accessible and transparent process available for respondents to seek exemption from a survey due to specific circumstances.	Same as 1.1.2	Refer to 1.1.2

KPI 3 overall rating is  'Good'.

KPI 4 – compliance and monitoring approaches are streamlined and coordinated

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

Overall rating for sub-KPI 4.1 is  'Good'.

Evidence 4.1.1	Evidence source	Outcome
ABS ensures surveys are appropriate and necessary by tabling proposals for the collection of information before both Houses of Parliament in accordance with section 6 of the <i>Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975</i> .	Parliament of Australia website. DOCUMENTS TABLED IN PARLIAMENT BY THE ABS	Refer to Parliament of Australia website.
Evidence 4.1.2	Evidence source	
Eliminating duplication in business collections conducted by official bodies for statistics purposes.	Same as 1.2.1	Refer to 1.2.1
Evidence 4.1.3	Evidence source	
ABS surveys adopt target response rates that reduce regulatory risk by removing the need to continually follow up difficult to contact respondents.	Same as 3.2.1	Refer to 3.2.1

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

Overall rating for sub-KPI 4.2 is  'Good'.

Evidence 4.2.1	Evidence source	Outcome
Avoidance of duplication in collections conducted by official bodies for statistical purposes.	Same as 1.2.1	Refer to 1.2.1

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

Overall rating for sub-KPI 4.3 is  'Good'.

Evidence 4.3.1	Evidence source	Outcome
ABS advances data integration initiatives, thereby reducing the need for additional regulatory burden.	Annual Performance Statement targets 2.2 and 2.3 (Annual Report Chapter 4) and documented approvals for ABS data integration proposals.	Strong progress made.
Evidence 4.3.2	Evidence source	Outcome
ABS utilises administrative data sources to reduce regulatory burden.	Annual Performance Statement target 2.3 (Annual Report Chapter 4).	Target met.

Comment: In response to a changing environment, the ABS has been seeking to widen the availability of its microdata while protecting privacy. This has introduced a whole new way of working with microdata, which has met user needs and resulted in a high demand for the new services that are being trialled. The baseline was established and achieved in 2015–16 due to the high take-up of the new ABS DataLab. In 2016–17 the number of registered integrated data users increased from 68 to 209, an increase of 307%. Trials of the ABS DataLab continue, allowing the ABS to refine the provision of secure access to selected researchers.

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

Overall rating for sub-KPI 4.4 is  'Good'.

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

KPI 4 overall rating is  'Good'.

Improved reporting

The 2015-16 report flagged the introduction of evidence 4.3.2 to provide additional information. This evidence has been included in this report.

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

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

Overall rating for sub-KPI 5.1 is  'Good'.

Evidence 5.1.1	Evidence source	Outcome
Complaint resolution performance meets ABS Surveys Charter standards.	Same as 1.2.2	Refer to 1.2.2
Evidence 5.1.2	Evidence source	Outcome
Information is accessible and concise on the ABS Website for survey participants on their frequently asked questions.	Same as 2.1.1	Refer to 2.1.1

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

Overall rating for sub-KPI 5.2 is  'Good'.

Evidence 5.2.1	Evidence source	Outcome
Response rates for (key) surveys published.	Same as 3.2.1	Refer to 3.2.1
Evidence 5.2.2	Evidence source	Outcome
ABS regulator performance framework metrics and annual result publicly available by 31 December each financial year.	Annual regulator performance framework metrics and annual ABS Regulator Performance Framework report published on ABS website.	Target met.
Evidence 5.2.3	Evidence source	Outcome
ABS performance and activity is published annually.	ABS Annual Report	Target met.

KPI 5 overall rating 5 is  'Good'.

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

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

Overall rating for sub-KPI 6.1 is  'Good'.

Evidence 6.1.1	Evidence source	Outcome
Resources allocated to engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in each state and territory to ensure cooperative and collaborative relationships with data providers and promote trust and efficiency.	Same as 1.1.1	Refer to 1.1.1
Evidence 6.1.2	Evidence source	
Products, services and tools are available and improved to assist providers to meet their obligations.	Same as 1.3.1	Refer to 1.3.1

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

Overall rating for sub-KPI 6.2 is  'Good'.

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

Overall rating for KPI 6 is  'Good'.

Attachment

The validation mechanism

'Regulator performance will be assessed through annual, externally validated self-assessments against the Framework.' (Page 8 [Regulator Performance Framework](#)). This external validation is provided by a group of external stakeholders that have an interest in the ABS. The composition of the list of stakeholders was initially agreed jointly by the ABS, Treasury and the Minister in 2015. The stakeholder group was refined ahead of the 2015-16 self-assessment process in consultation with Treasury. The ABS 2016-17 RPF draft self-assessment was disseminated to the agreed list of stakeholders on 16 November 2017, with comments requested by 24 November 2017.

RPF Consultation summary

Comments on the ABS 2016-17 self-assessment were received from one of the external stakeholders. The ABS engaged individually with each external stakeholder prior to requesting comments via email.

Summary of stakeholder comments:

- The scope of the assessment is considered to be adequate and in line with recommendations provided in 2015 when developing the set of performance metrics.
- Agreement with the assessment grading presented across all 6 KPIs. However, in specific reference to the amber rating for sub-KPI 1.2, the stakeholder noted that neither they nor their members have raised concerns in regard to any unintended negative impacts of surveys on respondents.
- The conclusion of each KPI and overall are reasonable and accurate and the evidence supports these conclusions.
- Recommend that the ABS undertake greater stakeholder engagement when proposing changes to specific data sets, particularly more examination of the utility of specific datasets at an industry level.