

Australian Bureau of Statistics Forms Design Policy

Summary

In 1983 the Prime Minister requested that all Ministers review the effectiveness of official forms used within their own areas of responsibility. This initiative, named Simpler Forms Program, was aimed at improving the efficiency and effectiveness of government documents, particularly forms required to be completed by the public.

2 In 1986, a selection of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) collection forms was reviewed by David Sless, of the Communication Research Institute of Australia. The long-term consequence of that review has been the development and promulgation of (statistical) Forms Development Procedures and Design Standards. In 2002 these were split into two manuals, the Forms Design Standards and the Forms Development and Evaluation Manual.

ABS Policy

3 Collection forms subject to the following ABS policies are those ABS documents used for the collection of statistical information from people, businesses, government agencies etc, which are prepared and/or certified in pursuance of section 10(1) of the *Census and Statistics Act 1905*.

4 It is ABS policy that the Forms Design Standards and the Forms Development and Evaluation Manual must be followed when a new form is designed or an existing form is amended.

5 It is ABS policy that the responsibility for the design and evaluation of statistical collection forms rests in subject matter areas.

6 It is ABS policy that the central Data Collection Methodology Section is responsible for providing to subject matter areas a coordinated source of specialist advice, assistance, training and knowledge of forms design and development procedures.

7 It is ABS policy that the Data Collection Methodology Section has a responsibility to assist Divisions and Regional Offices with the evaluation of the performance of forms, monitoring the impact of the Forms Design Standards and the Forms Development and Evaluation Manual and acquisition of the level of expertise necessary to introduce and maintain forms evaluation procedures as an essential element of their data collection processes.

(ABS policy dates from the September 1988 Management Meeting when decisions were made on recommendations by David Sless, of the Communication Research Institute of Australia, in his report "Collection Forms in the Australian Bureau of Statistics, August 1988".)

8 The ABS has 5 policy objectives for its forms development program to:

- design forms, in full consultation with intended users of the statistics, which are easy for respondents to complete;
- reduce the high cost of follow-up action to check or verify reported information;

- establish and maintain forms which provide the potential for highly effective communication between respondents and the ABS;
- project to respondents a professional and efficient image of the ABS; and
- promote a unified corporate approach to form design which enables respondents to distinguish ABS forms from those of other areas of government.

Responsibilities of the Data Collection Methodology Section

9 The responsibilities of the Section are to :

- promote good forms design throughout the ABS;
- provide expert advice on forms design;
- provide training in forms design;
- provide expert advice on forms evaluation;
- provide training in forms evaluation;
- liaise with developers on expert systems;
- pursue a watching brief on electronic and tailored forms and develop appropriate standards which reflect current developments ;
- assess the impact of the form design policy; and
- maintain an index of collection forms which provides an appropriate framework to support research into the performance of ABS collection forms.

Responsibilities of Branch Heads

10 Branch Heads are responsible for:

- intelligence gathering on the performance of all forms, particularly Central Office collections;
- form design and evaluation;
- ensuring that approved forms have been developed in accordance with the Standards;
- ensuring that approved forms conform to the Standards;
- formal approval of official collection forms prior to printing;
- certification of the printed forms; and
- provision of information on approved forms to the Data Collection Methodology Section.

Responsibilities of Regional Offices

11 In addition to exercising the same responsibilities as Branch Heads, applied to State-specific collections, Regional Offices are also responsible for:

- intelligence gathering on the performance of all forms; and
- participation in important phases of forms design and evaluation managed by Central Office.

Functions of Regional Office Forms Coordinators

12 Regional Office Forms Coordinators are responsible for:

- provision, and/or coordination, of appropriate training and advice in forms design and evaluation;
- distribution of the Forms Design Standards and the Forms Development and Evaluation Manuals; and
- promoting and monitoring the involvement of Regional Office subject matter areas and National Project Centres in the design and development of collection forms.

Responsibilities of Program Managers

13 Program Managers are the key officers with the task of planning the development of a form, including a requirement to ensure that an appropriate balance of Regional, and Central Office resources be used in a form development and evaluation program.

Forms Design Standards and Forms Development and Evaluation Manuals

14 The final design of a form will often be a compromise between competing interests: statistical, administrative, data processing and respondents' interests (ease of completion, respondent load, availability of data etc.).

15 The ABS Forms Design Standards and the Forms Development and Evaluation Manual provides a detailed step-by-step introduction to collection form design with the aim of balancing and integrating these competing interests in a rational form development process.

16 In particular, the following major interests are taken into account:

- Statistical: The form must collect accurate data.
- Administrative: The form must conform with ABS administrative practice on the expression of legal obligations, such as authority and confidentiality.
- Data Processing: The form must be easily processed by people and machines, including despatch and receipt, clerical examination and data entry.

- Respondents: A respondent should be able to complete the form accurately in a reasonable amount of time. The form must take account of the special characteristics of the particular respondents for a collection and their ability to complete the form.

17 The Forms Development and Evaluation Manual helps collection managers take account of different people's perceptions in the form development process.

18 The Forms Design Standards provide graphic elements such as typefaces, colours and rules of layout that will give the form a good appearance under all conditions of use, and explain how to use language that will be understood by respondents and to design questions that will be answered correctly by respondents.

Mandatory Wording

19 There are four elements which must be included on the front of the form. These are:

Collection Authority

"The information asked for is collected under the authority of the Census and Statistics Act. Your cooperation is sought in completing and returning this form by the due date. The Act provides me with the power, if needed, to direct you to provide the information sought." (The last sentence is omitted when the collection is to be undertaken on a voluntary basis.);

Confidentiality

"Your completed form remains confidential to the Australian Bureau of Statistics.";

Due Date

"Please complete this form and return it to the Australian Bureau of Statistics by ...(due date)..."; and

Help Available

"If you have problems in completing this form, please contact our officer ...(name)..., on ... (telephone number)... ."

or

"If you have problems in completing this form, please contact the Australian bureau of Statistics in your State or territory. Details are listed on page # of this form."

20 These words must be used unless evidence can be provided that in a particular case another set of words gets the message across more effectively.

21 In relation to Collection Authority, there are legal requirements (under Sections 10 and 11 of the Census and Statistics Act) for the wording provided in subparagraph 19a above.