NatureScot
Scotland's Nature Agency

**NatureScot**

**SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

**INFORMATION PAPER**

# Understanding public attitudes and behaviours: progress and next steps for NatureScot’s survey work

## Purpose

1. This information paper provides an update on the implementation of our population level survey work over the last 18 months and looks ahead to future opportunities and challenges for our survey projects.

## Action

1. The SAC is asked to note the contents of the paper. Comments are also welcome, especially on the issues and opportunities discussed in relation to collaboration and partnership, data gaps and maintaining a long-term approach.

## Preparation

1. The paper was written by Doug Mitchell and Alan Macpherson with input from Pete Rawcliffe. It is sponsored by Eileen Stuart.

## Background

1. Previous papers to the SAC in 2020 and 2021 set out NatureScot’s developing strategy for monitoring how people in Scotland engage with, and benefit from, nature within the broader context of the national population survey landscape in Scotland. Key actions highlighted including liaison with the Scottish Government on the retention of crucial questions in the Scottish Household Survey (SHS), seeking new survey partners for Scotland’s People and Nature Survey (SPANS), and assessing the need for, and feasibility of, a change in methodology for SPANS (a switch from face-to-face to online surveying). Since then, we have successfully recommissioned SPANS (within a wider 10-year monitoring strategy) and are reaching the end of the first wave of data collection. We have also recommissioned the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC) awareness survey and refreshed our approach to the Nature Omnibus Survey. 2024 will see the first data from all these three surveys published.

## Monitoring long-term trends (SPANS)

1. Scotland’s People and Nature Survey (SPANS) has, since 2013, been the key component in NatureScot’s strategy for monitoring long-term trends in how people in Scotland use and value the natural environment. SPANS data complements, interprets and supports annual high-level figures provided by the Scottish Household Survey (SHS) on frequency of visits to the outdoors, use of greenspace and volunteering by giving a much greater depth of information on behaviour as well as the opportunity for cross-analysis with other variables relating to outdoor recreation and environmental attitudes. Together, these two surveys provide a comprehensive set of data on how adults in Scotland use, value and enjoy the outdoors and connect with nature; enable us to monitor key trends over the long-term; and allow us to produce statistically robust reporting across a range of population groups and geographies.
2. As proposed in our 2021 SAC paper, following the conclusion of the previous SPANS contract after the 2019/20 survey wave, we developed a new 10-year business case for SPANS, consisting of four survey waves in 2023, 2026, 2029 and 2032. Approval was granted by the Scottish Government in 2022 for the first two of the proposed four waves. In commissioning this work, our contractual commitment is limited to the initial survey year with the option to extend the contract (with the same contractor and survey method) in subsequent survey years.
3. In terms of approach, the new cycle of SPANS retains many of the characteristics of its predecessor. However, the key methodological change has been the shift from face-to-face to online surveying, a practical change necessitated by shifts in the market research sector anticipated in the 2020 SAC paper. Further methodological details for SPANS are provided in Annex 1.
4. The survey will continue to provide key data on the frequency of visits to the outdoors, the types of places people visit and the activities they undertake, the benefits of outdoor recreation, barriers to participation, and use of greenspace. As of 2023, we have broadened the scope of the survey with new questions and content to enhance the depth and analytical opportunities of the data. In particular, we have strengthened our questions on health and wellbeing, allowing us to better understand the relationship between health, outdoor recreation and connection with nature, and in turn help quantify the contribution that our natural environment makes to positive health outcomes at a population level. Noting evidence from the pandemic, we have added new questions on access to domestic outdoor spaces, which are seen as a key determinant in accessing the benefits of nature. New questions on pro-nature activities, both generally and garden-specific, will provide valuable evidence to inform action in support of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Delivery Plan.
5. An important new addition to SPANS is the Nature Connectedness Index (NCI) — a question set designed to measure people’s connectedness to nature at a population level. The NCI will afford several new ways to analyse and contextualise SPANS data, allowing us to gather evidence on the relative importance of contact with nature and nature connection, as well as the characteristics of experiences in natural environments that are most likely to support nature connection and delivery of outcomes. Data on nature connectedness in Scotland is likely to play an important role in informing and measuring the impact of our Environment Strategy and Scottish Biodiversity Strategy. Developed by the University of Derby (see [Richardson et al 2019](https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/11/12/3250)), the NCI has seen growing uptake in population surveys, most notably in Natural England’s People and Nature Survey (PANS).
6. Given the elevated rates of outdoor recreation recorded during and immediately after the pandemic period, and the desire to understand these shifts in relation to ‘normal’ participation levels before and since, we anticipate considerable interest in SPANS findings. Due to the change in methodology, 2023/24 will constitute a new baseline for SPANS data. Inevitable comparisons with previous data (and data from other surveys) will need to be carefully contextualised and qualified.
7. We are taking steps to improve the accessibility of SPANS data on our website to facilitate greater awareness of the survey and use of its findings. The first outputs from SPANS are expected in late-May/early-June 2024, following a web-first staggered publication approach, consisting of an initial headline report followed, in later months, by four thematic reports (outdoor recreation; health & wellbeing; equality & diversity; and nature connection), a technical report and publication of the data tables. This sequenced approach will provide multiple opportunities to promote the survey’s key messages.
8. **We invite SAC to note the SPANS approach generally, interpretation of data from surveys of different methodologies, the utilisation of NCI in analysing the data, as well as promotion and publication of SPANS findings.**

## Short-term public attitudes (SOAC and NOS)

1. Alongside the long-term monitoring function offered by SPANS, a business need was identified for monitoring public attitudes more flexibly over shorter timescales. Previously this need has been met by the Scottish Nature Omnibus (SNO), which last operated in 2019. This relatively small biannual survey was primarily focused on our corporate data needs, providing figures on public awareness and understanding of our work, as well as attitudes towards a range of issues falling within our remit.
2. To continue to meet this need, an annual contract for a new survey replacing the SNO – the NatureScot Opinion Survey (NOS) – commenced in 2022. The NOS will continue to provide insight into how NatureScot’s function is understood and valued by the public, along with attitudinal data on key policy issues, such as rewilding, biodiversity loss, and wildlife management. Compared with SPANS, this survey uses a smaller sample size, runs at one point in the year, and contains a smaller number of questions. However, by operating annually, the NOS offers a flexible way of quickly responding to changing corporate data needs as they arise year to year, thereby performing a different but valuable complementary role to the monitoring of longer-term trends by SPANS.
3. The first NOS was conducted in 2022 and [published in 2023](https://www.nature.scot/doc/naturescot-research-report-1335-naturescot-opinion-survey-2022). Fieldwork for the second NOS was completed in November 2023 and a draft report is in preparation. Further methodological detail for NOS is included in Annex 1.
4. NatureScot has a statutory responsibility to publicise and promote understanding of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC/the Code). As part of this, we have monitored public awareness of the Code for many years, previously through the inclusion of questions in ‘old’ SPANS or by buying space in the Scottish Opinion Survey. Due to the cessation of these face-to-face survey vehicles, a new dedicated online survey, conducted annually in the autumn, was commissioned in 2021. This short survey includes questions on whether or not people have heard of SOAC (and where they might have heard of it) and recall of responsible outdoor behaviour messaging they have encountered across various media. This approach not only allows us to monitor trends in Code awareness among people in Scotland, but also what kinds of communications and messages (whether from NatureScot or other organisations) are getting through to people.

## Opportunities and challenges

## *Collaboration and partnership*

1. We liaise regularly with the administrators of the other UK national outdoor recreation surveys (Natural England (PANS); Natural Resources Wales; and Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland) to discuss issues relating to monitoring outdoor recreation, including interpreting data following transitions from in-person to online methods (NE have gone through a similar methodological shift recently), the comparability and compatibility of national survey datasets, and the application of UK outdoor recreation data to key national and international priorities, such as the Global Biodiversity Framework.

## *Data gaps*

1. SPANS plays an important role in accounting Scotland’s natural capital. The Natural Capital Asset Index (NCAI) draws on visit behaviour from SPANS in assessing the usage of different natural spaces. However, for economic data NCAI relies on data from 2012. Visit spend questions have not been included in more recent surveys due to concerns over cost, survey space and data quality. Questions on spending are included in PANS and used to produce figures for the economic value of outdoor recreation in England. One possible alternative approach to produce similar economic analyses for Scotland would be to develop a method for interpreting expected spend patterns based on demographic and visit information and apply this retrospectively to the SPANS data.
2. A key priority for our work is to understand and address inequalities of access to, and benefits from, nature and the outdoors. By employing a very large sample size, SPANS is able to produce robust data for many minority demographic groups for key questions. Nevertheless, population surveys are inherently limited tools for measuring data among minorities and low-visibility groups. Ideally, such surveys should be complemented by focused qualitative and quantitative studies on particular groups in order to fully understand experiences and barriers encountered across society.
3. The lower age limit for all of the population surveys we commission is 18. Children and some young people are therefore absent in the data we collect on outdoor recreation and environmental attitudes. There are logistical and financial reasons for not including lower age groups in this research. Nevertheless, there is interest among our stakeholders in understanding patterns of outdoor recreation and nature connection among young people.

## *Maintaining a longer-term approach*

1. Our survey and evidence strategy relies on data from outside sources, key among which is the Scottish Household Survey, which provides regular figures for visits to the outdoors, use of greenspace, and volunteering activity. However, the SHS is becoming increasingly squeezed for space. It is therefore increasingly difficult to guarantee the long-term existence, or regularity, of key questions. As such, we are likely to become increasingly reliant on our own monitoring framework for delivering our data needs.
2. Present economic uncertainty makes long-term planning difficult and may produce inefficiencies in the use of resources. For instance, NOS is currently compiled on a flexible, reactive basis. However, if its long-term future was assured, a more strategic use of the survey might be to theme it from year to year, for instance by including a longer set of questions around landscape one year, followed by green infrastructure the next, and so on. This approach would allow themes to be researched in more depth.
3. **Views from the SAC are welcomed on these challenges and opportunities.**

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## Annex 1

## SPANS method

1. SPANS operates triennially, with 2023/24 being the first wave of the present SPANS cycle. Three further survey waves are planned to commence in 2026, 2029 and 2032. SPANS employs a modular approach to delivering the survey, with approximately 1,000 people sampled each month over a full year. Under this method, questions are delivered at different frequencies and at different times over the year depending on the sample size and seasonality needed. The upper annual sample size, for questions asked monthly, is 12,000 people. This approach is suitable for producing the large sample sizes required for measuring long term trends, while still offering flexibility and reducing the overall length of the survey in each month.
2. The sample is collected via an online panel. Controls are in place to prevent participants from being resampled within a given timeframe. Demographic weightings are applied at the analysis stage. In addition, a visit weighting is applied to certain questions relating to visits to the outdoors. This approach is designed to make the results of these questions more representative of all the visits taken during the survey period.
3. Scottish Forestry, the two National Park Authorities and Sustrans are making financial contributions towards the cost of the project. Several question modules were added to the survey to meet partners’ needs, including modules on active travel, use of and attitudes towards woodland and a filter question on whether or not visits took place within one of the national parks.

## NOS method

1. NOS takes place annually in the autumn. The survey uses a representative sample of 1,000 adults in Scotland, collected via a blend of three online survey panels. This is necessary to achieve the required sample size and to avoid repeat sampling of respondents in future years - a key issue for questions asking about awareness of certain issues. Data is collection takes roughly one week to complete. Demographic weightings are applied to the results.

## SOAC awareness monitoring method

1. SOAC awareness monitoring takes place annually in the autumn. The survey uses a representative sample of 1,000 adults in Scotland, collected via an online survey panel. Data collection takes roughly one week to complete. Demographic weightings are applied to the results.
2. In commissioning this survey over 5 years, our contractual commitment was limited to two annual surveys in 2021 & 2022, with the option to extend the contract (with the same contractor and survey method) in the subsequent three years. This option was exercised for the 2023 survey.