

Q&A: Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE): The national survey on people and the natural Environment

Official Statistics

The MENE survey results are designated as ‘Official Statistics’ -- what are they?

The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 brought all ‘Official Statistics’ under the remit of the UK Statistics Authority. The purpose of the Act is to improve public trust and confidence in official statistics, by increasing transparency and independence in the way they are produced.

Why is some data designated as Official Statistics and others not?

Official Statistics should be produced using widely accepted statistical methods; be nationally representative; form part of a time series which is likely to continue; produce results that are likely to assist in the development and evaluation of public policy; and be of sufficient interest to attract public attention. MENE was designated as official statistics because it satisfied these criteria.

How does the Statistics Act influence the production of MENE?

The production of MENE is influenced by the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, and the Pre-release Access (PRA) Order 2008.

The Code of Practice for Official Statistics contains eight principles, and a statement of associated practices. Taken together, the principles and practices of the code are intended to ensure that the range of official statistics meets the needs of users; that the statistics are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and that the statistics are well explained.

The Pre-release Access (PRA) order 2008 limits the circulation of official statistics prior to publication. The intention is to avoid any perception that the figures have been influenced for policy or political purposes. Aside from those people involved in the collection, analysis and quality assurance of official statistics, prior access is limited to a strict maximum of 24 hours (actual not working), and anyone with access prior to publication must not disclose any values, or indicate size or trend.

It is Natural England’s view that MENE fully complies with the Code and Pre-Release Access order, and a separate document available on Natural England’s website is available to support this¹.

Survey methodology

How are the MENE results gathered?

MENE uses an in-house survey where respondents are asked about visits to the natural environment taken in the seven days prior to the survey, as well as a series

¹ See <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/research/mene.aspx>

of other related questions including visit duration, activities undertaken, reasons for visiting, and expenditure incurred.

Data collection began on the 6th March 2009 and is on-going. It involves weekly waves of interviews with a representative sample of the English adult population aged 16 and over in each wave. Each weekly wave achieves around 800 interviews across England.

How was the survey developed?

A scoping study was undertaken in 2007 to identify the most appropriate way of measuring engagement with the natural environment.

The scoping exercise involved consultation with key stakeholders, and qualitative research with members of the public to test survey concepts. Pilot surveys using online, telephone and face-to-face methods were also undertaken.

The chosen methodology was adopted because it was felt to be most cost effective, providing the best quality data, with interviewers able to clarify points to respondents and also use prompts and lists of answer options.

Does the MENE survey use a random sample?

No, the MENE survey uses a form of quota sampling.

Using the 2001 Census and the Royal Mail's Postal Address File, Great Britain, south of the Caledonian Canal, is divided into 600 areas of equal population. From these 600 areas, a master sampling frame of 300 sampling points is selected to reflect the country's geographical and socio-economic profile.

These areas are further subdivided into 12 sub-samples of 25 points each, with each point in itself being representative of the geographical and socio-economic profile mentioned above.

In each weekly wave around 800 interviews are undertaken across at least 100 sample points. Within each sample point, only one interview is undertaken per household and a minimum of six households is left between each interview. This ensures that interviewing is not clustered around small areas with similar demographic and lifestyle characteristics.

To ensure a balanced sample of adults a quota is set by gender (male, female housewife, female non-housewife), within the female housewife quota, presence of children and working status and within the male quota, working status. In each weekly wave a target of surveys is set, and the survey data is weighted to ensure it is representative of the English population.

Why wasn't a random sampling approach used?

The scoping study determined that the chosen sampling approach would deliver the best value for money compared to other methodologies.

As a rough guide, the sample size achieved for MENE would have cost approximately £2.5 million if a random sample had been used. This is mostly due to

the need to contact the addresses selected in the random sampling procedure on numerous occasions, normally because someone is not available on the first contact. This results in the need for much more interviewer time and therefore a higher cost to conduct the fieldwork.

Why did you need to sample so many people when opinion polls normally only sample around 1,100?

The MENE survey includes around 46,000 to 49,000 people per year.

The sample size simply reflects the need to have confidence in the findings at a local level. While 1,100 may give a reliable estimate for the whole country, there will be little useful detail at a smaller geographical level. As such, the information provided in MENE will give local people, local government and other organisations the ability to address local issues, confident in the knowledge that they are making decisions based on high quality, robust evidence.

Is the data representative of the English population?

Yes it is - in addition to the large sample the findings have also been weighted to reflect various facets of the demographics of England. From 201/12 onwards the data has also been re-weighted to represent the population profile of Upper Tier Local Authorities.

The weighting takes account of age and gender, region of residence, social grade, and presence of children in the household, gender and working status, presence of a dog in the household and rural/urban residence.

Further information on the weighting procedure can be found in the Technical Report – including a review of the weighting from the first year of the study. This is available on the Natural England website².

What level of accuracy does the survey offer?

Results are generally accurate to the following margins of error.

- Where the sample size exceeds 40,000, the results will generally be accurate to around +/-0.6%
- Where the sample size is around 10,000, the results will generally be accurate to around +/-1.3%
- Where the sample size is around 5,000, the results will generally be accurate to around +/-1.8%
- Where the sample is around 1,000, the results will generally be accurate to around +/-4%

The margins above are typically 1.3 times wider than those that would have been obtained using a simple random sample.

² See <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/research/mene.aspx>

How do you decide whether to make changes to elements of the survey?

Adaptations to the methods or classifications used in the survey are most often proposed to meet specific new data requirements or cease or reduce old ones that are no longer needed. In either case we seek the views of our data users via a short consultation (normally one month) on the MENE webpage before implementing a change.

The results of the consultations are published on the MENE webpage in advance of the changed statistics. To date we have only made two changes to the method: a) increase the frequency at which we ask question 12 on visit motivations, and b) reducing the frequency at which we ask question three on visit duration.

Survey scope

What is meant by “visits to the natural environment”?

Respondents are asked to think about occasions when they had spent time out of doors, which is defined as “open spaces in and around towns and cities, including parks, canals and nature areas; the coast and beaches; and the countryside - including farmland, woodland, hills and rivers”.

A visit can be anything from a few minutes to all day, and could include time spent close to home or a workplace, further afield or while on holiday in England. Respondents are asked to specifically discount routine shopping trips, or time spent in their own gardens.

What else does MENE include?

The survey relates to engagement with *the natural environment*. By natural environment we mean all green open spaces in and around towns and cities as well as the wider countryside and coastline.

The main focus of the survey is on *visits to the natural environment* (see above). However the survey also includes a smaller section of questions regarding engagement with the natural environment *other than that experienced during visits*. This includes activities such as time spent in private gardens, watching nature programmes on television and undertaking pro-environmental activities such as recycling.