



# AUSTRALIAN STATISTICS ADVISORY COUNCIL

## ANNUAL REPORT 2020–21



The Australian Statistics Advisory Council acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to their cultures and their Elders past and present.

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**AUSTRALIAN  
STATISTICS  
ADVISORY  
COUNCIL**

**ANNUAL REPORT**  
2020–21





## AUSTRALIAN STATISTICS ADVISORY COUNCIL

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The Hon Michael Sukkar MP  
Assistant Treasurer  
Minister for Housing  
Minister for Homelessness, Social and Community Housing  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Minister

I am pleased to submit the Australian Statistics Advisory Council's annual report for the year ending 30 June 2021.

The report outlines the work and activities of the Council and is submitted to you for presentation to Parliament under sub-section 24(1) of the *Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975*.

The Annual Report is dated on the day I approved the text for printing.

Yours sincerely

Professor Gary Banks AO  
Chairperson

15 September 2021

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# Foreword

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*The Chairperson of ASAC,  
Professor Gary Banks AO*

The pervasive challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic dominated 2020–21 and had significant implications for the role and work of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The Council congratulates the ABS on the way it responded to demands for information to gain a better understanding of the impacts of the pandemic and devise policy responses. There have been significant innovations both in the sourcing of data and to enable its timely release, as noted in this annual report.

The effectiveness of its response at such a critical time has demonstrated not only the capabilities of the ABS, but also the potential of its contribution. This in turn has seen a further increase in demand for its services. A welcome increase in core funding in the last budget should enable the ABS to respond in part without detracting from other essential activities. But some tension among competing priorities will remain and the Council will continue to do what it can to offer advice and support.

A consequence of the pandemic has been increased recognition of the importance to the ABS of its engagement with stakeholders and the fostering of partnerships with other bodies, both in the public and private domains, and across jurisdictions. Such interactions have enhanced the relevance and utility of the institution, and thus its public value, without impinging on its essential independence and high standards.

This annual report provides a brief account of ASAC's role and activities over the past year, and identifies future areas of focus. The constraints of the pandemic meant that Council meetings were predominantly conducted online rather than in person. I thank members very much for their cooperation and for their significant contributions during the year. On behalf of the Council, I would also like to thank the ASAC secretariat for its continuing support.

**Professor Gary Banks AO**  
Chairperson

# Chapter 1

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## About ASAC

### Mission

**To contribute to the effective development of Australia's statistical assets, by providing the Minister and the Australian Statistician with independent, relevant and timely advice on national priorities.**

The Australian Statistics Advisory Council (ASAC, the Council) was established by the *Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975* (the ABS Act). Under subsection 18(1) of the ABS Act, the Council is to advise the Minister and the Australian Statistician on:

- (a) *the improvement, extension and co-ordination of statistical services provided for public purposes in Australia;*
- (b) *annual and longer-term priorities and programs of work that should be adopted in relation to major aspects of the provision of those statistical services; and*
- (c) *any other matters relating generally to those statistical services.*

Subsection 24(1) of the ABS Act provides that: *the Council must, as soon as practicable after 30 June in each year, prepare and submit to the Minister, for presentation to the Parliament, a report relating to matters connected with the operation of this Act.*

The ABS Act enables both the relevant Minister and the Australian Statistician to seek advice from the Council on these matters. The Australian Statistician keeps the Council informed of key developments related to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The Chairperson meets with the Minister and Australian Statistician as appropriate to ensure relevant advice and assistance from the Council are made available to them.

### Role and operations of the Council

ASAC contributes to ABS decision-making regarding statistical priorities and helps inform its assessment of risks and appropriate strategies. ASAC also advocates for a national statistical system that is adequately resourced and effectively managed.

The ABS Act provides that the Council shall consist of a part-time Chairperson, the Australian Statistician (*ex officio*), and between ten and twenty-two part-time members, including a senior official from each State and Territory nominated by the Premier or Chief Minister. In addition, the Council includes representatives from academia, business and community sectors. Council members are appointed for their ability to identify emerging issues and assist in promoting greater coordination nationally.

During 2020–21, the Minister responsible for the ABS and ASAC was the Hon Michael Sukkar MP, Assistant Treasurer. The Minister appoints the Council Chairperson and members for five and three years respectively. Members are eligible for reappointment when their terms expire. The names and positions of members as at 30 June 2021 are detailed at Appendix 1.

The Council typically meets three times a year and may also interact out of session on any specific matters requiring its attention. Since 2019–20, formal meetings needed to be adapted to meet the requirements of the COVID-19 response.

The Chairperson receives an annual fee as set by the Remuneration Tribunal, with other members serving in an honorary capacity. Members receive a prescribed travel allowance, where applicable, to support their attendance at meetings.

The office of the ASAC Secretary is held by Michael Smedes, Program Manager, National Accounts. Costs associated with the operations of ASAC are met from the ABS budget, and secretariat services are provided, as part of their wider duties, by ABS staff. Council secretariat services include:

- arranging and supporting meetings
- administering ASAC activities and membership
- assisting with preparation of its Annual Report
- drafting submissions, correspondence or papers issued under the authority of the Council or the Chairperson.



# Chapter 2

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## Year in Review: 2020–21

The Council commends the ABS for the manner in which it has responded to the needs of the Government and the Australian community as the global COVID-19 pandemic continued into 2020–21. The Council also acknowledges the significant preparation and engagement efforts undertaken in the lead up to the 2021 Census.

The Council held two meetings during 2020–21: in November 2020 and April 2021 (see Appendix 3 for agendas).

### **ABS work program and resourcing**

The ABS objectives for 2020–21 (as outlined in its Corporate Plan) were:

1. produce high-quality statistics
2. improve access to ABS statistics
3. reduce burden on data providers
4. produce new statistics and data.

The topics discussed at the Council meetings this year aligned with these objectives, with a particular focus on the coming Census and ongoing data issues related to COVID-19.

### ***COVID-19 response***

Council members were complimentary in their feedback to the ABS on its response to COVID-19, noting its innovative efforts to provide time critical data and constructive ongoing engagement across jurisdictions. This was seen as having led to an increase in confidence and support for the ABS. Of particular note were:

- the policy usefulness of alternative data assets such as Single Touch Payroll (STP) and banking transactions data
- the provision of more timely insights across a range of statistical products
- ABS support for the Treasury's COVID-19 recovery monitoring efforts
- increased collaboration with states and territories.

### ***ABS funding***

The Council maintained its support for the ABS in its efforts to have its funding increased. It was pleased at the positive outcome from the October 2020 Budget.

### **2021 Census of Population and Housing**

The Council continued to receive updates from the ABS on preparations in the lead up to Census Day on 10 August 2021. In addition to a range of activities and milestones, the Council discussed:

- the ABS incident and crisis management approach for Census
- ABS plans for managing the potential effects of COVID-19

- how the ABS would manage communications relating to any misinformation about the Census
- the leveraging of state and territory stakeholder relationships to promote Census employment opportunities and communications.

In 2020, the Council made a submission to the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) audit of ABS preparedness for the 2021 Census. During 2020–21, the Council was informed by the ABS that recommendations from the ANAO audit had been fully addressed.

## Big Data

With the ABS seeking opportunities to work with big data suppliers, including from the banking and retail sectors, the Council discussed the significant potential for this to create public value while reducing respondent burden. Concerns were nevertheless expressed around:

- possible implications of burden and costs being shifted to private enterprises
- experiences with private enterprises seeking remuneration for sharing their data
- potential privacy impacts depending on the degree of detail in big data sets.

## Australian Public Service Data Professional Stream

The Australian Public Service (APS) Data Professional Stream was established to lift the data capability of the workforce by sourcing, growing and mobilising data expertise across the APS. In September 2020, the Australian Statistician, Dr David Gruen, was appointed as the inaugural Head of the Data Profession.

The Council expressed support for this key capability-building initiative and emphasised the importance of data literacy within the public sector. Members discussed:

- opportunities for collaboration across governments, as well as with tertiary providers, STEM organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples
- the qualifications sought in the Data Stream, given the different approaches to analysis brought by data scientists, statisticians, econometricians, etc.

## Cross-jurisdictional priorities

Council meetings provide an opportunity for the ABS to receive information and advice about emerging statistical issues across the jurisdictions and sectors represented. In addition to those already identified, members highlighted the following priorities:

- a strong ongoing appetite from state and territory governments for quarterly Gross State Product data
- assistance from the ABS in explaining differences between STP and the Labour Force Survey data to Ministers and other stakeholders within the states and territories
- gaining a more detailed understanding of labour force supply issues in sectors that rely on overseas workers, e.g. construction, tourism and fruit picking.

# Chapter 3

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## Year Ahead: 2021–22

The Council's priorities for 2021–22 will remain broadly the same in continuing to advise and lend support to the ABS (see the Statement of Intent for 2021–22 in Appendix 2). The evolution and significant impacts of COVID-19 will continue to place a premium on the need for agility and being adaptive to change.

### **ABS work program and resourcing**

Notwithstanding the welcome positive outcome from the October 2020 Federal Budget, which provides necessary additional core funding from 2021–22, the ABS will continue to face resourcing challenges in fulfilling its role as Australia's national statistics agency. Among other things, the Council expects that there will be ongoing demand for COVID-19 related data. This will continue to impact on the ABS work program while presenting opportunities for further innovation and collaboration. The Council will provide guidance on enterprise priorities and shifts as detailed in the ABS Enterprise Strategy.

### **ABS role within an evolving data landscape**

The data landscape is rapidly evolving, and the role of the ABS will need to evolve along with it. This change is occurring across all sectors of society – business, government and the broader community. Within the Australian Government, the Australian Data Strategy is being developed to set out how the Government will enhance effective, safe and secure data and the Office of the National Data Commissioner is promoting greater use of public sector data. The Council will continue to assist the ABS with clarifying its roles and responsibilities within this evolving landscape.

### **Building and maintaining community trust**

Maintaining high levels of trust remains an imperative for the ABS and will continue to be a key area of focus for the Council. Ongoing issues include the balancing of confidentiality with providing necessary access to data, as well as adapting collection methods while maintaining quality levels. Broad community support is vital to ABS operations and trust in ABS statistics is critical to their use in decision-making within government and more widely.

### **Capability uplift**

The need for a more systematic approach to capability building has seen the innovation of the Data Professional Stream. As this initiative matures, the Council will help raise awareness of the program and provide advice regarding synergies with the activities of other jurisdictions and sectors.

### **2021 Census of Population and Housing**

The Council will monitor developments as the Census proceeds in August 2021 and discuss lessons from changes made to inform planning for the 2026 Census and potential innovations over the longer term. Key areas of change for the 2021 Census include:

- the introduction of the Census 'response window', enabling people to complete the Census ahead of Census night
- incident and crisis management
- communication and engagement activities.

# Appendix 1

## Membership of ASAC as at 30 June 2021

<b>Member</b>	<b>Date first appointed</b>
<b>Professor Gary Banks AO</b> Professorial Fellow Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research The University of Melbourne	28 February 2017
<b>Dr David Gruen</b> Australian Statistician ( <i>ex officio</i> ) Australian Bureau of Statistics	11 December 2019
<b>Professor Deborah Cobb-Clark</b> Professor of Economics The University of Sydney	2 November 2015
<b>Dr Luci Ellis</b> Assistant Governor (Economic) Reserve Bank of Australia	2 November 2015
<b>Mr Luke Yeaman</b> Deputy Secretary, Macroeconomic Group The Treasury	4 November 2020

<b>State/Territory Representatives</b>	<b>Date first appointed</b>
<b>Mr Stephen Walters</b> Chief Economist, Fiscal and Economic Group New South Wales Treasury	2 November 2015
<b>Mr Chris Barrett</b> Deputy Secretary, Economic Division Department of Treasury and Finance, Victoria	3 May 2021
<b>Mr Antony Skinner</b> Government Statistician Queensland Treasury	8 April 2013
<b>Mr Stuart Hocking PSM</b> Deputy Chief Executive Department of Treasury and Finance, South Australia	19 August 2019
<b>Mr Alistair Jones</b> Executive Director, Economic Business Unit Department of Treasury, Western Australia	31 October 2018
<b>Ms Fiona Calvert</b> Deputy Secretary, Economic and Financial Policy Division Department of Treasury and Finance, Tasmania	5 August 2020
<b>Mr Mick Butler</b> Deputy Under Treasurer Department of Treasury and Finance, Northern Territory	3 May 2021

## **Additional contributing members in 2020–21**

- Professor Lisa Jackson Pulver, Deputy Vice Chancellor, University of Sydney
- Professor Abigail Payne, Director and Ronald Henderson Professor, University of Melbourne
- Mr Stephen Miners, Deputy Under Treasurer, Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate, Australian Capital Territory.

## **Changes in membership in 2020–21**

The following members were appointed to the Council during 2020–21:

- Mr Chris Barrett
- Mr Mick Butler
- Ms Fiona Calvert
- Mr Luke Yeaman.

The following members were farewelled in 2020–21, with thanks for their contributions to the work of the Council:

- Mr David Braines-Mead: member since 3 July 2018, resigned 28 February 2021
- Mr David Byers: member since 30 April 2018, term completed 29 April 2021.

# Appendix 2

## 2021–22 ASAC Statement of Intent

### Purpose and Role of ASAC

- 1 The Australian Statistics Advisory Council (ASAC) was established by the *Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975* (the ABS Act).

The ABS Act (section 18) states that:

- (1) The functions of the Council are to advise the Minister and the Statistician in relation to:
  - (a) the improvement, extension and co-ordination of statistical services provided for public purposes in Australia;
  - (b) annual and longer-term priorities and programs of work that should be adopted in relation to major aspects of the provision of those statistical services; and
  - (c) any other matters relating generally to those statistical services.
- (2) Either the Minister or the Statistician, or both of them, may refer matters of the kind referred to in subsection (1) to the Council for the purpose of seeking the advice of the Council in relation to those matters.

- 2 In line with its legislated functions, ASAC will represent government and community interests by advising the Minister and the Australian Statistician on Australia's current and longer-term statistical priorities and how the ABS work program can deliver on them.
- 3 As an advisory forum with broad membership and understanding of developments in the wider environment, ASAC will:
  - advise the Minister and the ABS as appropriate in relation to ABS functions
  - provide input into the strategic directions, risks, priorities and key deliverables of the ABS
  - advocate for an effective national statistical system and support the ABS' role within it
  - report annually to the Parliament.
- 4 To help the ABS respond to issues and plan for the future, ASAC will:
  - provide the ABS with frank advice and feedback
  - draw on the expertise of ASAC members and seek input from stakeholders
  - help identify risks and raise potential issues
  - provide guidance where needed to ensure the ABS remains a trusted and relevant data provider.

- 5 The Chairperson of ASAC will convey advice to the Minister as appropriate and report back to the Council.
- 6 ASAC members are appointed for their ability to identify emerging needs and promote the value of data and its coordination within and across jurisdictions and sectors. They have the seniority to navigate and help influence the decision-making environment and to ensure the Council retains a strategic focus.

## Priorities for 2021–22

- **Advise on the ABS work program under resource constraints** to ensure the ongoing needs of government and stakeholders for quality data can be met in a timely, efficient and effective manner.
- **Assist in clarifying ABS roles and responsibilities within an evolving institutional landscape**, including in data integration and access, strengthening data security, and in the promotion of an effective national statistical system.
- **Assist in building and maintaining community trust**, including through supporting ABS activities, identifying potential reputational risks and advising on stakeholder engagement.
- **Advise on opportunities** to enhance statistical capabilities across the public sector and beyond.
- **Monitor and advise on the 2026 Census program** in light of lessons from the 2021 Census including potential innovations in the conduct of the Census, and longer-term possibilities for the Census.

## 2021–22 activities

- 1 Three meetings are planned for 2021–22: August 2021 (virtual), November 2021 (Melbourne) and March 2022 (Canberra), noting COVID-19 may affect these planned dates and locations. Additional engagement outside formal meetings may be undertaken as appropriate.
- 2 To meet the requirements prescribed in subsection 24(1) of the ABS Act, ASAC will provide an annual report to the Minister in line with the tabling guidelines issued by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

# Appendix 3

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## ASAC 2020–21 meeting agenda

### **18 November 2020**

1. Welcome and introduction
2. Statistician's report
3. Members' reports
4. Budget implications and the Forward Work Program
5. APS Data Profession initiative
6. 2021 Census update
7. Other business

### **21 April 2021**

1. Welcome and introduction
2. Statistician's report
3. Members' reports
4. 2021 Census update
5. Enabling geo-spatial presentation of ABS data
6. ABS' role in an evolving landscape
7. Other business



# Appendix 4

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## Freedom of Information

In accordance with section 8 of the *Freedom of Information Act 1982*, details of the structure and functions of ASAC and how members of the public can obtain access to information held by the Council are outlined below.

### **Establishment, organisation and functions**

For information regarding the establishment, organisation and function of ASAC, see Chapter 1 – About ASAC.

### **Powers**

As an advisory body, ASAC has no decision-making or other powers directly affecting members of the public. The Council does not administer any enactments or schemes.

### **Arrangements for outside participation**

ASAC members are appointed by the Minister responsible for the ABS to ensure a broad range of views and interests are reflected in the advice that the Council offers to the Minister and the Australian Statistician. For membership details, see Appendix 1.

Persons or bodies outside the Australian Government administration may contribute matters for the Council's consideration by making representations to the Minister or the ASAC Chairperson. Contributions can be directed in writing to the ASAC Secretary at the address below.

### **Information available**

The ASAC Annual Report is available from ABS offices, and on the ASAC and ABS websites. The ABS maintains records on behalf of ASAC relating to:

- the administration of the Council
- papers discussed at Council meetings
- summary records of meeting proceedings
- correspondence relating to the activities of the Council.

### **Feedback and enquiries**

ASAC welcomes feedback on this report. Feedback or enquiries related to accessing ASAC documents, including enquiries under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982*, may be directed in writing (by post or email) to:

Secretary  
Australian Statistics Advisory Council  
c/- Australian Bureau of Statistics  
Locked Bag 10  
Belconnen ACT 2616  
  
Email: [asac@abs.gov.au](mailto:asac@abs.gov.au)

