

# Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

## Statistics on Internet Access

*(produced by the Office for National Statistics)*

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### **About the UK Statistics Authority**

The UK Statistics Authority is an independent body operating at arm's length from government as a non-ministerial department, directly accountable to Parliament. It was established on 1 April 2008 by the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*.

The Authority's overall objective is to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. It is also required to promote and safeguard the quality and comprehensiveness of official statistics, and good practice in relation to official statistics.

The Statistics Authority has two main functions:

1. oversight of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) – the executive office of the Authority;
2. independent scrutiny (monitoring and assessment) of all official statistics produced in the UK.

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# **Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics**

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## ASSESSMENT AND DESIGNATION

The *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* gives the UK Statistics Authority a statutory power to assess sets of statistics against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*. Assessment will determine whether it is appropriate for the statistics to be designated as National Statistics.

Designation as National Statistics means that the statistics comply with the *Code of Practice*. The *Code* is wide-ranging. Designation can be interpreted to mean that the statistics: meet identified user needs; are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and are explained well.

Designation as National Statistics should not be interpreted to mean that the statistics are always correct. For example, whilst the *Code* requires statistics to be produced to a level of accuracy that meets users' needs, it also recognises that errors can occur – in which case it requires them to be corrected and publicised.

Assessment reports will not normally comment further on a set of statistics, for example on their validity as social or economic measures. However, reports may point to such questions if the Authority believes that further research would be desirable.

Assessment reports typically provide an overview of any noteworthy features of the methods used to produce the statistics, and will highlight substantial concerns about quality.

Assessment reports also describe aspects of the ways in which the producer addresses the 'sound methods and assured quality' principle of the *Code*, but do not themselves constitute a review of the methods used to produce the statistics. However the *Code* requires producers to "seek to achieve continuous improvement in statistical processes by, for example, undertaking regular reviews".

The Authority may grant designation on condition that the producer body takes steps, within a stated timeframe, to fully meet the *Code's* requirements. This is to avoid public confusion and does not reduce the obligation to comply with the *Code*.

The Authority grants designation on the basis of three main sources of information:

- i. factual evidence and assurances by senior statisticians in the producer body;
- ii. the views of users who we contact, or who contact us, and;
- iii. our own review activity.

Should further information come to light subsequently which changes the Authority's analysis, it may withdraw the Assessment report and revise it as necessary.

It is a statutory requirement on the producer body to ensure that it continues to produce the set of statistics designated as National Statistics in compliance with the *Code of Practice*.

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# 1 Summary of findings

## 1.1 Introduction

- 1.1.1 This is one of a series of reports<sup>1</sup> prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*<sup>2</sup>. The Act requires all statistics currently designated as National Statistics to be assessed against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*<sup>3</sup>. The report covers the set of statistics reported in *Internet Access – Households and Individuals*<sup>4</sup>, produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).
- 1.1.2 The Act also allows the National Statistician to request an assessment of other official statistics in order for them to gain National Statistics status. In response to such a request, this report covers the set of official statistics reported in *Internet Access – Quarterly Update*<sup>5</sup>, produced by ONS.
- 1.1.3 Section 3 of this report adopts an ‘exception reporting’ approach – it includes text only to support the Requirements made to strengthen compliance with the *Code* and Suggestions made to improve confidence in the production, management and dissemination of these statistics. This abbreviated style of report reflects the Head of Assessment’s consideration of aspects of risk and materiality<sup>6</sup>. The Assessment team nonetheless assessed compliance with all parts of the *Code of Practice* and has commented on all those in respect of which some remedial action is recommended.
- 1.1.4 This report was prepared by the Authority’s Assessment team, and approved by the Board of the Statistics Authority on the advice of the Head of Assessment.

## 1.2 Decision concerning designation as National Statistics

- 1.2.1 The Statistics Authority judges that the statistics covered by this report are readily accessible, produced according to sound methods and managed impartially and objectively in the public interest, subject to any points for action in this report. The Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics published in *Internet Access – Households and Individuals* are designated as National Statistics, and has determined that the statistics published in *Internet Access – Quarterly Update* can be designated as new National Statistics product, subject to ONS implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by August 2012.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga\\_20070018\\_en.pdf](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/all-releases.html?definition=tcn%3A77-22416>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/all-releases.html?definition=tcn%3A77-224992>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/guidance-about-assessment/criteria-for-deciding-upon-the-format-of-an-assessment-report.pdf>

### 1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

- 1.3.1 ONS compiles the statistics using well-established survey methods, via its Opinions Survey and the Labour Force Survey (LFS). ONS has responded directly to an important user need for more frequent statistics by introducing a question on the LFS that allows quarterly estimates to be produced.
- 1.3.2 The 2010 statistical release for *Internet Access – Households and Individuals* contained informative commentary, and analysis of the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of internet users. However, the commentary in the 2011 release is less informative, focusing mainly on the most recent year's results without commenting on long term trends, and includes no analysis of socio-economic and demographic factors. Estimates of the number of internet users are no longer included in the 2011 release.

### 1.4 Detailed recommendations

- 1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that ONS could strengthen its compliance with the *Code*. Those which the Assessment team considers essential to enable designation as National Statistics are listed in section 1.5. Other suggestions, which would improve the statistics and the service provided to users, but which are not formally required for their designation, are listed at annex 1.

### 1.5 Requirements for designation as National Statistics

<b>Requirement 1</b>	Take steps to develop a greater understanding of the use made of the statistics, publish the relevant information and assumptions and use them to better support the use of the statistics (para 3.1).
<b>Requirement 2</b>	Assess the user need for statistics for Northern Ireland against the quality of the estimates that could be provided (para 3.3).
<b>Requirement 3</b>	Provide more complete information on quality, and comment about quality and reliability in relation to the range of potential uses (para 3.4).
<b>Requirement 4</b>	Consider publishing a historical time series for individual internet use (para 3.5).
<b>Requirement 5</b>	Improve the commentary in the releases so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics (para 3.6).
<b>Requirement 6</b>	Include the name and contact details of the responsible statistician in the statistical releases (para 3.7).

## 2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 *Internet Access – Households and Individuals* contains information about households with access to the internet and about individuals' use of the internet. The annual release of these estimates began in 2006, replacing more frequent results produced from other surveys with smaller samples. The first internet access results were published in 1998. The statistics are compiled from data collected via ONS's Opinions Survey<sup>7</sup> (previously known as the Omnibus Survey). The data are collected from January to March each year. In these months, a random sample of about 1,800 adults, aged 16 and over, living in private households throughout Great Britain, is interviewed. After accounting for refusals and where no contact can be made, approximately 1,100 interviews are conducted each month.
- 2.2 In 2011 ONS added a question on internet use to its Labour Force Survey<sup>8</sup> (LFS). This was in response to user demand for more frequent estimates. Each quarter, the LFS interviews adults in a random sample of around 41,000 private households in Great Britain. The results are currently published in *Internet Access – Quarterly Update*.
- 2.3 The statistics are used as a measure of success by the organisation Race Online 2012<sup>9</sup>, which aims to help as many new people as possible get online by 2012. The statistics are also submitted to the European Union statistics agency (Eurostat), to meet Council Regulation 808/2004. The European data requirements are agreed annually in discussion between Eurostat, member states and policy makers. Other uses of the statistics include:
- investigating the level of access by socio-economic and demographic characteristics, in the context of research about the potential of digital technology to reduce deprivation;
  - assessing the extent of internet penetration, and the likely characteristics of those who do not access the internet, to inform decisions about whether online market research is appropriate; and
  - helping to inform service providers whether the internet is an appropriate channel of communication with service users.
- 2.4 The estimated cost to ONS of producing *Internet Access – Households and Individuals* in 2011 was £148,000. In previous years Eurostat has supported the survey with a grant; in 2011 this was £23,000. The grant application for 2012 was not successful. The estimated cost to ONS of collecting the data via the LFS for *Internet Access – Quarterly Update* was £149,112.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/who-we-are/services/opinions--omnibus--survey/opinions--omnibus--survey.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/specific/labour-market/labour-market-statistics/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://raceonline2012.org/>

### 3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 ONS told us that it understands how the statistics are used by Race Online 2012, and that is mindful of the European data requirements. Users that responded to our consultation reported that they were satisfied with the responsiveness of the statistics team in ONS. ONS responded to the needs of Race Online 2012 in its decision to introduce a question on the LFS. However, ONS does not proactively engage with other users of these statistics. While it has published some information about how Race Online 2012 use the statistics, it has not published an explanation of why the statistics are important and for what they are likely to be used. ONS complies with European data requirements, but acknowledges it could do more to engage with the wider user community. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should take steps to develop a greater understanding of the use made of the statistics, publish the relevant information and assumptions and use them to better support the use of the statistics<sup>10</sup> (Requirement 1). We suggest that ONS refer to the types of use put forward in the Statistics Authority's Monitoring Brief, *The Use Made of Official Statistics*<sup>11</sup> when documenting use.
- 3.2 For the 2011 release of *Internet Access – Households and Individuals*, ONS decided not to publish estimates from the Opinions Survey of the number of internet users, as new estimates from the LFS were now included in the *Quarterly Update*, and ONS decided that publishing two estimates might confuse users. It did not inform users of this decision prior to the publication of the statistics. ONS has confirmed to us that future changes to the statistics will be announced well in advance of the changed statistics.
- 3.3 Fieldwork for the internet access questions asked on the Opinions Survey has not been carried out in Northern Ireland since 2008, due to the unavailability of funding from the Department for Finance and Personnel, Northern Ireland. As an interim measure for 2009 and 2010, results were estimated for Northern Ireland by weighting GB results for Northern Ireland households. In 2010, when it was confirmed that funding for Northern Ireland fieldwork would not continue, ONS ceased publication of the estimated results for Northern Ireland. However, there is evidence of a continuing need for estimates for Northern Ireland. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should assess the user need for statistics for Northern Ireland against the quality of the estimates that could be provided<sup>12</sup> (Requirement 2).
- 3.4 ONS has published a Summary Quality Report (SQR)<sup>13</sup> for *Internet Access – Individuals and Households*. Some strengths and limitations are summarised in the SQR; however, these are written as generic strengths and limitations of the Opinions Survey, rather than of the Internet Access statistics<sup>14</sup>. The *Individuals and Households* release contains information about sampling variability, response rates and weighting, but does not comment on the quality and

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<sup>10</sup> In relation to Principle 1, Practices 1, 2, 3 and 5 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-briefs/monitoring-brief-6-2010---the-use-made-of-official-statistics.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> In relation to Principle 1, Practice 2 and Principle 4, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/quality/quality-information/social-statistics/summary-quality-report-for-internet-access.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> For example, the SQR states 'only face to face interviews are undertaken. This can improve response rates ...'

reliability of the statistics in relation to the range of potential uses. Confidence intervals are published for some of the tables. There is no SQR for the *Quarterly Update* release; some information about quality, such as confidence intervals, is included in the release, but without comment in relation to the range of potential uses. The releases mention that the results from the Opinions Survey and the LFS are 'not directly comparable' and that 'care should be taken when comparing results from the two releases'; however, in the absence of guidance for users on the comparability of the two sets of statistics, it is not clear what 'care' should be taken by users. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should provide more complete information about quality, and comment on quality and reliability in relation to the range of potential uses<sup>15</sup> (Requirement 3). In meeting this Requirement we suggest that ONS publish the survey questions used to collect the data.

3.5 The first statistics on individual internet use were published in 1998. Neither *Internet Access – Households and Individuals* nor *Internet Access – Quarterly Update* provide a historical time series of individual internet use. While the changes to methods that have occurred since 1998 may require careful explanation, we think that this should not prevent the publication of a historical time series. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should consider publishing a historical time series of individual internet use<sup>16</sup> (Requirement 4).

3.6 The 2010 release of *Internet Access – Households and Individuals* contained detailed commentary which went beyond simple rises and falls, including suitable comparisons over an appropriate period of time, and analysis of the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of internet users. However, the commentary in the 2011 release is less informative, focusing mainly on the most recent year's results without commenting on long term trends, and includes no analysis of socio-economic and demographic factors. Estimates of numbers of internet users were not included in the 2011 release and instead were included only in the *Quarterly Update* statistics. The annual statistics therefore provide an incomplete picture. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should improve the commentary in the releases so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics<sup>17</sup> (Requirement 5). We suggest that in meeting this requirement, ONS should consider the points detailed in annex 2. We further suggest that ONS should consider (a) combining the quarterly LFS-based statistics within the annual release, and (b) reintroducing the following features into the annual release:

- a time series of the number of internet users and non-users;
- analysis of associated socio-economic and demographic indicators; and
- estimates at a regional level.

3.7 The name and contact details of the responsible statistician is included on the web pages for the statistical releases. However, it is not included in the downloadable PDF version of the statistical release. As part of the designation

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<sup>15</sup> In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2, Principle 8, Practice 1 and Protocol 1, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>16</sup> In relation to Principle 4, Practice 7 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>17</sup> In relation to Principle 8, Practice 3 of the *Code of Practice*

as National Statistics, ONS should include the name and contact details of the responsible statistician in the statistical releases<sup>18</sup> (Requirement 6).

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<sup>18</sup> In relation to Protocol 2, Practice 6 of the *Code of Practice*

## Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to ONS's internet access statistics in the interest of the public good. These are not formally required for designation, but the Assessment team considers that their implementation will improve public confidence in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics.

- |                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| <b>Suggestion 1</b> | Refer to the types of use put forward in the Statistics Authority's Monitoring Brief, <i>The Use Made of Official Statistics</i> when documenting use (para 3.1).   |
| <b>Suggestion 2</b> | Publish the survey questions used to collect the data (para 3.4).   |
| <b>Suggestion 3</b> | Consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve the statistical releases (para 3.6).   |
| <b>Suggestion 4</b> | Consider (a) combining the quarterly LFS-based statistics within the annual release, and (b) reintroducing the following features into the annual release: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• a time series of the number of internet users and non-users;</li><li>• analysis of associated socio-economic and demographic indicators; and</li><li>• estimates at a regional level (para 3.6).</li></ul> |

## Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Releases

- A2.1 In October 2010, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Releases*<sup>19</sup>. While this is not part of the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*, the Authority regards it as advice that will promote both understanding and compliance with the *Code*. In relation to the statistical releases associated with *Internet Access – Households and Individuals* and *Internet Access – Quarterly Update*, this annex comments on compliance with the statement on standards.
- A2.2 In implementing any Requirements of this report (at paragraph 1.5) which relate to the content of statistical releases, we encourage the producer body to apply the standards as fully as possible.

### Appropriate identification of the statistics being released

- A2.3 The titles of both releases adequately describe the coverage of the statistics and the point of time to which the statistics relate. Standard headings and logos are used. Paragraphs near the beginning of the releases provide a brief account of what is included in each release.
- A2.4 The releases do not contain the date of the next publication. The releases do not include contact details for the responsible statistician.

### Include commentary that is helpful to the non-expert and presents the main messages in plain English

- A2.5 *Internet Access – Households and Individuals* contains a short summary of ‘key points’ at the start, but most of these do not make appropriate comparisons; for example comparisons with results from previous years, or the number of internet users as a proportion of the population.
- A2.6 The 2010 release of *Internet Access – Households and Individuals* contained detailed commentary which went beyond simple rises and falls and made suitable comparisons over an appropriate period of time. It also provided commentary and analysis on the socio-economic and demographic indicators that are linked with internet use. However, the commentary in the 2011 release is less informative, focusing mainly on the most recent year’s results without commenting on long term trends. It includes no analysis of socio-economic and demographic factors. Estimates of numbers of internet users are no longer included in the 2011 release; therefore the release provides an incomplete picture.
- A2.7 The commentary in *Internet Access – Quarterly Update* is limited to a description of the latest statistics, and comments about whether the figures have risen or fallen since the last quarter. Much of this commentary would be better presented in a table or chart.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

A2.8 *Internet Access – Households and Individuals* states that the statistics will be useful for ‘those interested in the Internet and how its use is changing how people live and communicate’. *Internet Access – Quarterly Update* mentions use by Race Online 2012. Aside from this, there is no explanation of why the statistics are important and for what they are likely to be used.

A2.9 The language used is straightforward and technical terms are explained in the text or in the background notes.

A2.10 No international comparisons are made.

### **Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound**

A2.11 The text used in the releases is impartial and evidence based. The releases include information on response rates for the relevant surveys and the extent of revisions.

### **Include information about the context and likely uses**

A2.12 The releases do not include information about the policy or operational context in which the statistics have been collected and will be used.

A2.13 The releases contain information about sampling variability, response rates and weighting. They do not comment on the quality and reliability of the statistics in relation to the range of potential uses.

A2.14 The releases mention that the results from the Opinions Survey and the LFS are ‘not directly comparable’ and that ‘care should be taken when comparing results from the two releases’. However, in the absence of guidance for users on the comparability of the two sets of statistics, it is not clear what ‘care’ should be taken by users. No attempt is made to provide a consistent time series of the number of internet users.

### **Include, or link to, appropriate metadata**

A2.15 Basic information about sources is included in the releases. The releases do not link to more detailed methods and quality information, for example as provided in the SQR for Internet Access Statistics<sup>20</sup>.

A2.16 There is no indication of comparability with other similar data for other countries.

A2.17 The release indicates that the statistics are not revised.

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/quality/quality-information/social-statistics/summary-quality-report-for-internet-access.pdf>

## Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from January to April 2012.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Joe Cuddeford and Jill Barelli – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of ONS in January. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 5 March. The Assessment team subsequently reviewed compliance with the *Code of Practice*, taking account of the written evidence provided and other relevant sources of evidence.

### Summary of users contacted, and issues raised

A3.3 Part of the assessment process involves our consideration of the views of users. We approach some known and potential users of the set of statistics, and we invite comments via an open note on the Authority's website. This process is not a statistical survey, but it enables us to gain some insights about the extent to which the statistics meet users' needs and the extent to which users feel that the producers of those statistics engage with them. We are aware that responses from users may not be representative of wider views, and we take account of this in the way that we prepare assessment reports.

A3.4 The Assessment team received five responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Central government / public sector	2
Academic	1
Charity	1
Market research	1

A3.5 Users were broadly satisfied that the statistics met their needs. One user found the statistics helpful as a starting point, but would prefer more detail for smaller geographic areas. Another user requested that ONS revert to publishing estimates for Northern Ireland. More information on the exact question wording was also requested. All users were satisfied with the responsiveness of the ONS team. One user would welcome further engagement with ONS to discuss ways to ensure greater accessibility for people with disabilities.

### Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document



