

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

## Statistics on Personal Well-being

*(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 allows an appropriate authority<sup>3</sup> to request an assessment of official statistics against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*<sup>4</sup> in order for them to gain National Statistics status. This report is in response to such a request. The report covers the sets of statistics reported in *Personal Well-Being in the UK*<sup>5</sup> (PWB) which includes UK level estimates, and *Personal Well-being Across the UK*<sup>6</sup> (PWBA) which includes national and sub-national estimates, produced by the Office for National Statistics.
- 1.1.2 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>7</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.
- 1.1.3 This report was prepared by the Authority’s Assessment team, and approved by the Assessment Committee on behalf of the Board of the Statistics Authority, based 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 *Personal Well-Being in the UK* and *Personal Well-being Across the UK* are designated as National Statistics, subject to the Office for National Statistics implementing the Requirements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by June 2014. The Requirements specifically include ONS being required to produce a revised version of the previous edition of *Personal Well-Being in the UK* to a standard that demonstrates that it has the capacity to improve commentary, by June 2014.

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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> Subsection 12(7) of the Act defines ‘appropriate authority’ as Ministers of the Crown, Scottish Ministers, Welsh Ministers, Northern Ireland departments or the National Statistician

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/wellbeing/measuring-national-well-being/personal-well-being-in-the-uk--2012-13/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/wellbeing/measuring-national-well-being/personal-well-being-across-the-uk--2012-13/index.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/guidance-about-assessment/criteria-for-deciding-upon-the-format-of-an-assessment-report.pdf>

1.2.2 The Office for National Statistics has informed the Assessment team that it has started to implement the Requirements listed in section 1.5. The Statistics Authority welcomes this.

### 1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

1.3.1 The personal well-being statistics have a high public profile and were subject to a well-publicised consultation which had a high response as part of their development. ONS is involved in international groups that consider the development of these measures and has taken the opportunity to be at the leading edge of their development. However, recent consultations have been more focused on expert groups, and the findings of wider public consultations have not been published.

1.3.2 The statistics are presented in comprehensive reports with supporting contextual information for some of the statistics. ONS publishes supporting information such as a clear and comprehensive FAQ document.

1.3.3 ONS makes use of an appropriate survey in the collection of these statistics, drawing on an existing survey with a large sample. While this has benefits in terms of efficiencies it limits the range of analysis that can be conducted on the well-being statistics – for example the absence of variables on household income prevents an analysis of how personal well-being varies with household income. The survey uses a mixed mode data collection and the effect on the headline estimates is explained in the statistical reports but it is not clear what action users should take when using these estimates.

### 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>	a) publish plans to further engage with the public in the development of the forthcoming reports; and b) provide more specific examples of how the statistics are used (para 3.2).
<b>Requirement 2</b>	Provide clear information in the personal well-being statistical reports about the impact that the different data collection methods could have on the statistics and their use (para 3.4).
<b>Requirement 3</b>	Provide information in the statistical reports about all aspects of the strengths and limitations of the

statistics, including their volatility over time, and the impact on the use and potential use of them (para 3.6)

**Requirement 4**

a) improve the commentary in the reports so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics and provides a full understanding of the estimates of well-being, b) produce a revised version of *PWB* (2013) based on this improved level of commentary, and c) ensure that visual representations convey messages consistent with the content of the reports. As part of meeting this Requirement, ONS should consider the points detailed in annex 2 in continuing to develop and improve the commentary. (para 3.7).

**Requirement 5**

ONS should remove the experimental statistics label from personal well-being statistics (para 3.9).

**Requirement 6**

Publish the data associated with *PWB* and *PWBA* in an open format that equates to at least a Three Star level under the Five Star Scheme (para 3.10).

## 2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 In 2008 the French government established the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress<sup>8</sup>. Its aim was to identify the limits of GDP as an indicator of economic performance and social progress and to consider additional information required for the production of a more relevant picture. The Commission's 2009 report<sup>9</sup> highlighted the need to widen the focus from measuring GDP towards more complete measures of societal well being, including environmental and social sustainability
- 2.2 In 2010 the UK government launched the National Well-being Measurement programme to develop a wider understanding of the economic and social progress of the country beyond standalone measures such as GDP. The Prime Minister asked the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to 'devise a new way of measuring well-being'<sup>10</sup>. ONS initiated a 'national debate' to gather a wide range of views on what affects personal well-being to help inform the development of suitable measures. The debate ran between 25 November 2010 and 15 April 2011 and led to the development and publication<sup>11</sup> of a series of measurements comprising 10 domains and 38 measures of well-being. ONS produces statistics about these National Well-being measures<sup>12</sup>, drawing together a range of headline statistics on areas such as health, economic security, education, and environmental conditions in addition to the estimates of personal well-being covered by this report. The headline measures are presented in a series of reports and in the interactive 'National well-being wheel of measures'<sup>13</sup>.
- 2.3 While the programme of work was being developed, the statistics were initially referred to as subjective well-being statistics but they are now commonly referred to as personal well-being statistics. This change followed feedback from users suggesting that personal well-being was a more easily understood term.
- 2.4 ONS publishes statistics on personal well-being within two annual reports. *Personal Well-being in the UK (PWB)* includes UK level estimates and was first published in July 2012. *Personal Well-being Across the UK (PWBA)* includes national and sub-national estimates and was first published in October 2013. ONS describes the statistics in both reports as 'Experimental Statistics'. ONS told us that it plans to present these statistics in a single report for future releases.
- 2.5 ONS collects the data for personal well-being statistics through its Annual Population Survey (APS). The questions for personal well-being were added in April 2011 and data are derived from a customised, weighted, 12-month dataset, designed to be representative of the UK population. The sample size of the personal well-being dataset is 165,000 adults aged 16 and over and covers those living in households in the UK. The sample is a subset of the APS

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/en/index.htm>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/documents/rapport\\_anglais.pdf](http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/documents/rapport_anglais.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-on-wellbeing>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/wellbeing/measuring-national-well-being/domains-and-measures---september-2013/art-measuring-national-well-being---domains-and-measures---september-2013.html>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/publications/index.html>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/interactive/well-being-wheel-of-measures/index.html>

data as the questions are only asked of those aged 16 and over who give a direct interview; proxy answers are not collected.

2.6 The APS was first conducted in 2004 and combines data from the first and fifth waves<sup>14</sup> of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) with data from the English, Welsh and Scottish LFS boosts. The APS is a mixed mode survey using face to face and telephone interviews.

2.7 ONS uses four questions to measure personal well-being:

- Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?
- Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?
- Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?
- Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?

The questions are answered on a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is 'not at all' and 10 is 'completely' and are intended to allow people to provide an overall assessment of their lives along with an indication of their day-to-day emotions.

2.8 *PWB* presents the differences in personal well-being by sex, age, ethnicity, relationship status, health, disability, and employment status. *PWBA* presents the statistics at a range of geographical levels including: countries of the UK; regions of England; English Unitary Authorities and Counties; Unitary Authorities in Wales; and Local Authorities in Scotland. Further reference tables presenting data at local authority district level in England and district council areas in Northern Ireland are published on the ONS website. ONS told us that although estimates are available at a Local Authority level, the sample size is not sufficiently large to carry out detailed analysis at this level. The statistical team is investigating approaches to combining datasets from different years to allow more detailed analysis of these estimates.

2.9 ONS publishes a list of other surveys that include the ONS personal well-being questions<sup>15</sup>. This also includes a list of surveys using different variations of the questions.

2.10 Well-being is a developing field with no national or international standards to follow. ONS told us that it is working with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Eurostat to support the development of standards, with OECD to produce guidelines for measuring personal well-being and with a Eurostat taskforce to create an ad hoc module on personal well-being for EU-SILC<sup>16</sup>.

2.11 ONS told us that the statistics are used in the policy making process by Government and for the monitoring, evaluation and measurement of policy. In addition ONS has identified that the statistics are used for international comparison purposes and to provide evidence which enables a broader understanding of the nation's progress and inform decision making by individuals and groups.

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<sup>14</sup> For further information see the Labour Force Survey user guidance <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/specific/labour-market/labour-market-statistics/index.html>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/specific/social-and-welfare-methodology/subjective-wellbeing-survey-user-guide/index.html>

<sup>16</sup> [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/microdata/eu\\_silc](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/microdata/eu_silc)

- 2.12 ONS publishes the personal well-being statistical reports in pdf, with supplementary datasets published in Excel format. This equates to a level of two stars under the Five Star Scheme that forms part of the Open Standards Principles proposed in the *Open Data White Paper: Unleashing the Potential*<sup>17</sup> and adopted as government policy in November 2012<sup>18</sup>. Five stars represent the highest star rating within the Scheme.
- 2.13 ONS estimated that the cost to ONS of compiling the personal well-being statistics amounts to £150,000 for the financial year 2012-13.

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<sup>17</sup> [http://data.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Open\\_data\\_White\\_Paper.pdf](http://data.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Open_data_White_Paper.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-standards-principles/open-standards-principles>

### 3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 As part of the development of the new measures of national well-being – which include the statistics published in *PWB* and *PWBA* – ONS carried out a consultation commencing in November 2010 called ‘The National Well-being Debate’<sup>19</sup> and published the findings<sup>20</sup>. This initial user engagement was wide ranging, well publicised and clearly documented. As the programme developed, ONS focused its engagement on a number of advisory groups which comprised experts from across government, academia and research organisations, such as the Technical Advisory Group<sup>21</sup> (TAG) and the Measuring National Well-being Advisory Forum<sup>22</sup>. ONS has published minutes of these meetings and supporting documents on its website. In addition ONS has more recently carried out some smaller consultations<sup>23</sup> about specific aspects of the statistics such as the measures used, and the format and presentation of reports. In order to obtain a wider perspective, ONS carried out a Citizen User Consultation<sup>24</sup> to discover how members of the public perceive and understand the personal well-being outputs and how these could be improved. The results from the consultation were used to develop the 2013 editions of *PWB* and *PWBA*. ONS has published the headline findings and the topic guides used for the consultation on the TAG section of its website. ONS told us that it plans to obtain further user feedback about the format and presentation of the personal well-being statistical reports to inform the 2014 edition. ONS is also exploring the possibility of setting up a forum on StatsUserNet<sup>25</sup> to improve engagement with a wider range of users.
- 3.2 The statistical team told us that the statistics are primarily used as an evidence base for local and national policy making, and that the team engages with the Social Impacts Task Force<sup>26</sup> and with colleagues across government and the other UK administrations to improve its understanding about how these statistics are used. Overall, ONS has published relatively little information about the uses of the statistics and the current documentation would benefit from some specific examples. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should a) publish plans to further engage with the public in the development of the forthcoming reports; and b) provide more specific examples of how the statistics are used<sup>27</sup> (Requirement 1). We suggest that in meeting this Requirement ONS refer to the types of use put forward in the Statistics

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/about-ons/consultations/closed-consultations/measuring-national-well-being/index.html>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/publications/previous-publications/index.html>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/about-the-programme/advisory-groups/well-being-technical-advisory-group/index.html>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/about-the-programme/advisory-groups/well-being-advisory-forum/index.html>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/publications/previous-publications/index.html>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/about-the-programme/advisory-groups/well-being-technical-advisory-group/ons-wellbeing-user-consultation-debrief.ppt>

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.statsusernet.org.uk/home>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-impacts-task-force-update-on-recent-work>

<sup>27</sup> In relation to Principle 1, Practices 1 and 2 of the *Code of Practice*

Authority's Monitoring Brief, *The Use Made of Official Statistics*<sup>28</sup> when documenting use.

- 3.3 ONS told us that it aims to publish personal well-being statistics as soon as possible after it receives the data from the APS team. Initially July was established as a publication date, but the statistical team told us that this date created a production timetable that has been difficult to achieve. ONS told us that the implementation of an updated processing system, which was planned to speed up its data delivery, is behind schedule. As a result, ONS has recently considered alternative publication dates with a preferred option of September. The statistical team told us it has discussed the proposed change of date with some stakeholders who have indicated that a release date in September would be preferable as this would: avoid the Parliamentary recess period; enable improved Ministerial briefings; and allow more time for analysis and supporting material to be developed. ONS has not publicised the potential change of date. We suggest that ONS publicise the planned change in the release schedule and inform users of any future changes to the release schedule.
- 3.4 The APS is a mixed mode survey, carried out as a face to face or telephone survey. The use of the methods varies around the country, for example telephone interviews are carried out in the north of Scotland. In addition while all first interviews (wave 1) are carried out face-to-face, if the respondent agrees further interviews can be carried out by telephone<sup>29</sup>. The personal well-being statistical reports include background information about the effects of the different survey methods and the impact on the headline statistics, and the statistical team told us that it is investigating whether an adjustment can be applied to the statistics to account for the mode effects. However, the statistical reports do not make clear whether this effect is significant and what effect it has on lower level geographies. It is therefore unclear how users need to take this into account in their use of the statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should provide clear information in the personal well-being statistical reports about the impact that the different data collection methods could have on the statistics and their use<sup>30</sup> (Requirement 2).
- 3.5 ONS has published comprehensive user guidance<sup>31</sup> that includes information about the methods used in the production of the statistics and detailed information about the weights and variables used in the dataset. ONS also published quality and methodology Information<sup>32</sup> (QMI) to support the first release of the experimental 'subjective' well-being estimates. The QMI covers the six key quality dimensions referred to in the ESS quality framework<sup>33</sup> and ONS told us that it intends to review the QMI each year. ONS has also

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-reviews/monitoring-brief-6-2010---the-use-made-of-official-statistics.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/specific/labour-market/labour-market-statistics/volume-1---2011.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> In relation to Principle 4, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/specific/social-and-welfare-methodology/subjective-wellbeing-survey-user-guide/personal-well-being-survey-user-guide--2012-2013-dataset.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/quality/quality-information/people-and-places/first-annual-ons-experimental-subjective-well-being-results.pdf>

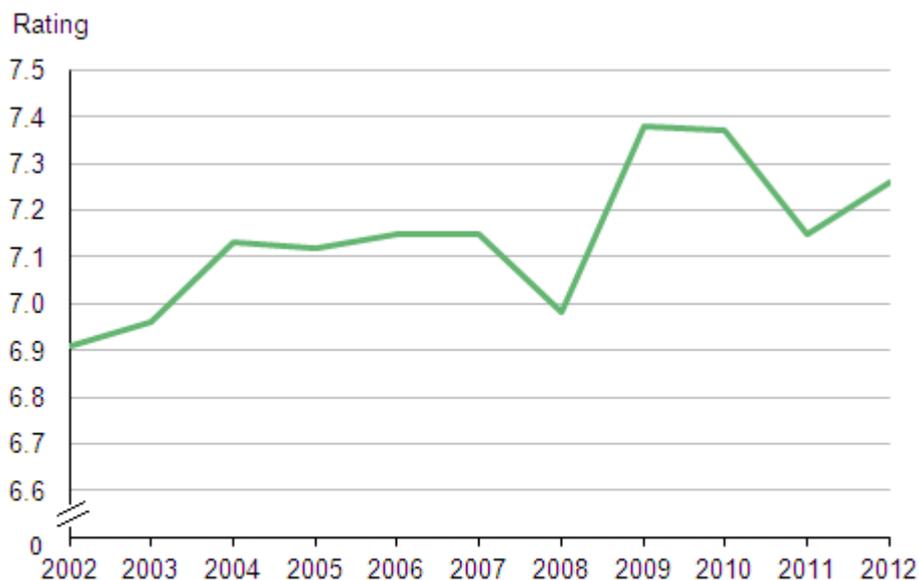
<sup>33</sup> <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/quality/introduction/>

published a Frequently Asked Questions<sup>34</sup> (FAQ) document which provides clear understandable information about the statistics, written in non-technical language. However, some of the other published supporting documents use technical language that may not be appropriate for the full range of users of these statistics. We suggest that ONS consider the broad range of users of personal well-being statistics and consider the opportunities for presenting more accessible information on these quality measures.

- 3.6 The statistical reports highlight examples of where changes in the personal well-being estimates across time periods, or differences between groups, are statistically significant. However, the reports do not explore the effect on the statistics of other forms of error, such as non-sampling error or the potential volatility over time, and the impact that these could have on the interpretation of the statistics over a longer period. For example, in *PWB* (2013), ONS includes Figure 2, reproduced below, but does not adequately describe the longer-term trend in life satisfaction ratings, nor discuss what factors (including non-sampling errors) influence either the trend or the fluctuations around it. Furthermore, ONS's choice of the scale for the y-axis in this figure appears to inappropriately amplify the magnitude of changes over time.

**Figure 2: Average life satisfaction in the UK, 2002 - 2012**

**United Kingdom**



Source: World Database of Happiness

As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should provide information in the statistical reports about all aspects of the strengths and limitations of the statistics, including their volatility over time, and the impact on the use and potential use of them<sup>35</sup> (Requirement 3).

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/specific/social-and-welfare-methodology/subjective-wellbeing-survey-user-guide/subjective-well-being-frequently-asked-questions-faq-s-.html>

<sup>35</sup> In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

- 3.7 More generally, the reports include some clear commentary supported by charts and tables, including links to the ‘National well-being wheel of measures’<sup>36</sup>. However, the narrative does not place the statistics in the context of the overall national well-being measurement programme, including how these statistics relate to the other domains and measurements in the programme or to other measures such as GDP. The commentary does not sufficiently explain how these statistics, when combined with other measures, provide a coherent picture of the well-being of the country, nor how the estimated changes in well-being over time should be interpreted in the light of quality of the statistics (as discussed in paragraph 3.6). *PWB* includes an infographic at the beginning of the report depicting a woman holding a child alongside the headline findings of ‘worthwhile’. This could be interpreted as ONS implying that the estimates link having children to ‘worthwhile’ life experience, although having children is not a topic covered in the report. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should a) improve the commentary in the reports so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics and provides a full understanding of the estimates of well-being, b) produce a revised version of *PWB* (2013) based on this improved level of commentary, and c) ensure that visual representations convey messages consistent with the content of the reports<sup>37</sup> (Requirement 4). As part of meeting this Requirement, ONS should consider the points detailed in annex 2 in continuing to develop and improve the commentary.
- 3.8 Some users who responded to our consultation about these statistics told us that they would welcome further analysis of the personal well-being statistics against a range of other subject areas, such as health or household income. ONS told us that it recognises some limitations to using the APS; that it is primarily a labour market survey meaning that there are limitations in the scope of the topic areas against which the personal well-being questions can be analysed. For example, a particular disadvantage is that the APS asks about earnings rather than household income meaning that it is not possible to examine how personal well-being varies in relation to household income. To overcome this, personal well-being questions have been included in other ONS surveys containing household income questions (for example Living Costs and Food Survey and Wealth and Assets Survey). ONS has published a list<sup>38</sup> of other surveys that use the personal well-being questions or variations of them, although it has not described the analyses that it plans to carry out using these other sources. We suggest that ONS clearly explain the limitations of the APS to users and describe the planned separate analyses of other sources.
- 3.9 *PWB* and *PWBA* are clearly marked as experimental statistics and the FAQ notes that the four questions are experimental in nature and could be subject to revision in the light of further user engagement, further testing and development and also international demands for harmonised questions. ONS has not confirmed when and how it plans to evaluate the experimental statistics or how it will involve users in that evaluation. As part of the designation as

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<sup>36</sup> See footnote 11

<sup>37</sup> In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/method-quality/specific/social-and-welfare-methodology/subjective-wellbeing-survey-user-guide/surveys-using-the-four-ons-personal-well-being-questions-as-of-september-2013.pdf>

National Statistics, ONS should remove the experimental statistics label from personal well-being statistics<sup>39</sup> (Requirement 5).

- 3.10 ONS publishes supplementary datasets for *PWB* and *PWBA* in Excel format but not in an open, non-proprietary format which would result in at least a three-star rating under the Five Star Openness Rating Scheme. The statistical team told us that it has met with the ONS Publishing Support team to discuss the publication of the data in the reference tables in CSV format. The team told us that it aims to publish the data in CSV format for the next release, or as soon as possible thereafter. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should publish the data associated with *PWB* and *PWBA* in an open format that equates to at least a Three Star level under the Five Star Scheme<sup>40</sup> (Requirement 6).

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<sup>39</sup> In relation to Principle 4, Practice 5 and Protocol 1, Practice 5 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>40</sup> In relation to Principle 8, Practice 6 of the *Code of Practice*

## Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to ONS's personal well-being 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.

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|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <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 3.2).                   |
| <b>Suggestion 2</b> | Publicise the planned change in the release schedule and inform users of any future changes to the release schedule (para 3.3).                                                     |
| <b>Suggestion 3</b> | Consider the broad range of users of personal well-being statistics and consider the opportunities for presenting more accessible information on these quality measures (para 3.5). |
| <b>Suggestion 4</b> | Clearly explain the limitations of the APS to users and describe the planned separate analyses of other sources (para 3.8).                                                         |

## Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Reports

- A2.1 In November 2012, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Reports*<sup>41</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 reports associated with Personal Well-being Statistics, 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 reports, we encourage the producer body to apply the standards as fully as possible.

### **Include an impartial narrative in plain English that draws out the main messages from the statistics**

- A2.3 *PWB* and *PWBA* present the statistics impartially and objectively and provide key points that are consistent with the statistics. The language used is straightforward, although some readers could find the language technical in some of the supporting reference documents. Some of the language used appears to be formulaic, and this could detract from the meaning of the commentary, for example the use of phrases such as ‘improvement in anxiety levels’.
- A2.4 There are some examples where data presented in charts are not fully explained in the commentary. For example Figure 3 in *PWB* presents data demonstrating that countries with a higher life satisfaction rating have generally shown a decrease in the rating since 2007, and countries with a lower life satisfaction rating have generally shown an increase in the rating in the same time period. Most countries have aligned towards the rating ‘7’, however neither this specific convergence, nor the general topic of regression to the mean, are discussed in the report.
- A2.5 The statistics in the reports are compared with the previous year but the report does not make clear when the data were first collected and therefore if longer time series are available.
- A2.6 The reports contain detailed information; the PDF versions of the reports would benefit from a table of contents to enable readers to quickly access the statistics most relevant to their needs.

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

- A2.7 *PWB* provides some information about the context for the findings at UK level. *PWBA* provides similar contextual information in separate sections about England, Wales and Scotland. These sections provide useful references to published research which provide further information for these statistics. ONS does not provide sufficient contextual information for Northern Ireland and *PWBA* does not clearly explain the reasons for this, using non-technical language. The narrative in *PWB* and *PWBA* includes a discussion of possible drivers for changes in the statistics compared with the previous year. European

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-reports.html>

comparisons are presented to place the UK estimates in the context of other European countries.

- A2.8 *PWB* includes some information about likely uses of the statistics, indicating that the statistics are primarily used for the broad themes of monitoring, policy making, international comparisons and public decision making. ONS does not include more specific examples of how these statistics are used. *PWBA* does not include references to the use of the statistics. The text in the introduction to *PWB* invites comments from users about how they use the statistics and it would be useful to augment this section of the reports with this information as ONS collates it.

### **Include information about the strengths and limitations of the statistics in relation to their potential use**

- A2.9 ONS provides detailed information about the methods used in the production of these reports in a range of documents published on its website. The reports do not provide sufficient information about the limitations of using the APS in the scope of the topic areas against which the personal well-being questions can be analysed.

### **Be professionally sound**

- A2.10 The statistics are clearly marked as experimental statistics and the term 'experimental' is consistently used in the text and methodology section to describe the statistics. However ONS does not explain what 'experimental' means or the process by which it plans to develop the statistics to remove this label.
- A2.11 The reports include tables, maps and a few charts to aid user interpretation. The structure of the PDF versions of the reports make some of the tables difficult to read; in some instances tables print across two pages and some table columns are poorly aligned. Some of the charts in the reports could be difficult to interpret when printed in grayscale, for example Figure 1 in *PWB* (2013) and *PWBA* (2013). The scale of the y-axis in Figure 2 in *PWB* (2013) appears to inappropriately amplify the scale of fluctuations around the long-term trend. *PWB* (2013) includes an infographic at the beginning of the report depicting a woman holding a child alongside the headline findings of 'worthwhile'. This could be interpreted as ONS implying that the estimates link having children to 'worthwhile' life experience, although having children is not a topic covered in the report. Furthermore, the full graphic as used in the html version of the report is not reproduced fully within the pdf version of the report.
- A2.12 ONS releases a range of publications under its Measuring National Well-being (MNW) Programme in a series of statistical reports, articles and analytical papers on its website. It is not clear from the website how these various publications relate to each other or to the overall MNW Programme aims.

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

- A2.13 A methodology section in *PWB* and *PWBA* provides brief explanations of why particular questions were chosen, information about the design of the APS and advice on interpreting the findings. More detailed methodological documents are published on the ONS website and some of these are linked to from the

reports. Some of these online documents use technical language and could be difficult for the more casual user to interpret. ONS publishes a User Guide for these statistics. This was published in 2012 and it is unclear if it is still relevant for the most recent reports.

A2.14 ONS publishes the underlying data in proprietary spreadsheet format alongside the reports.

A2.15 *PWB* and *PWBA* clearly state the release dates and coverage. The titles of the reports do not clearly explain the differences in the content presented in *PWB* and *PWBA*.

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

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from July 2013 to March 2014.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Neil Wilson and Catherine Barham – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of ONS in September 2013. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 13 November. The Assessment team subsequently met ONS during December to review 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 16 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Government	5
Academic	4
Policy/research insitiute	2
Professional Organisation	2
Devolved government	1
Local government	1
Voluntary organisation	1

A3.5 The respondents to our consultation told us that they use the statistics for a wide range of purposes. They are used to inform: briefings for ministers and the public; training, presentations and lectures; contributions to organisational reports and funding bids; and further research and analysis.

A3.6 While generally welcoming the commentary in the reports as clear and understandable, users told us that they would welcome further expansion of the commentary by exploring relationships with other variables such as health or household income. One user noted that it would be helpful to provide further detail about the uses of the statistics. Other suggested enhancements include making the data files accessible from a single area on the ONS website instead of via the reports. Users welcomed the data visualisations presented alongside the reports.

A3.7 Many users reported accessing the statistics directly from a notification email, and some commented that when trying to access the statistics directly they found the ONS website difficult to navigate. Users were positive about their

engagement with the producer team, reporting that they received helpful, timely and detailed responses if they contacted the team for advice.

**Key documents/links provided**

Written Evidence for Assessment document

