

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Overseas Travel and Tourism Statistics

*(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.

Contact us

Tel: 0845 604 1857

Email: authority.enquiries@statistics.gsi.gov.uk

Website: www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk

UK Statistics Authority
Statistics House
Myddelton Street
London EC1R 1UW

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ASSESSMENT AND DESIGNATION

Under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*, the UK Statistics Authority has a statutory function to assess sets of statistics against the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, with a view to determining whether it is appropriate for the statistics to be designated, or to retain their designation, as National Statistics.

Designation as National Statistics means that the statistics are deemed to be compliant with the Code of Practice. Whilst the Code is wide-ranging, designation may be broadly interpreted to mean that the statistics meet identified user needs; are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and are well explained.

Designation also signifies that, subject to any caveats in this report, the Statistics Authority judges that the statistics are readily accessible, produced according to sound methods and managed impartially and objectively in the public interest.

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

Designation as National Statistics will sometimes be granted in cases where some changes still need to be made to meet fully the requirements of the Code, on condition that steps are taken by the producer body, within a stated timeframe, to address the weaknesses. This is to avoid public confusion and does not reduce the obligation to comply with the Code.

Designation is granted on the basis of the information provided to the Statistics Authority, primarily by the organisation that produces the statistics. The information includes a range of factual evidence and also assurances by the producer organisation. The views of users are also sought. Should further information come to light subsequently which changes the Authority's analysis, the Assessment report may be withdrawn and revised as necessary.

Once designated as National Statistics, it is a statutory requirement on the producer organisation to ensure that the set of statistics continues to be produced, managed and disseminated 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 reports¹ prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*². The report describes the extent to which the Code of Practice is followed in the production, management and dissemination of overseas travel and tourism statistics, based on the International Passenger Survey (IPS), which are published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS):

- Overseas travel and tourism³ – monthly Statistical Bulletin;
- MQ6 Transport Travel and Tourism⁴ – quarterly publication;
- Travel Trends⁵ – annual publication; and
- Travelpac⁶ – quarterly datafiles of selected variables.

1.1.2 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 confirms that the statistics published by the ONS on overseas travel and tourism detailed in para 1.1.1 above are designated as National Statistics, subject to the ONS implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by November 2010, unless noted differently in the requirement.

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

1.3.1 The overseas travel and tourism statistics produced by ONS from the IPS are disseminated widely in an impartial manner, and are, in the main, presented clearly. Interpretation of the statistics would be aided by the inclusion of more metadata and commentary in some of the outputs. ONS and two marketing companies also produce customised output and analysis.

1.3.2 There is effective consultation with the main users (through the IPS Steering Group (see para 3.1)), who expressed satisfaction with the extent to which they are involved in decision making. However, there is less engagement with users outside the Steering Group and this should be developed in order to understand and address the needs of other users and potential users.

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

² http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf

³ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=8168>

⁴ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=1905>

⁵ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=1391>

⁶ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=14013>

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

Requirement 1	Take steps to engage more effectively with the wider user community in order to develop a more complete understanding of their needs, and make those steps known (para 3.3).
Requirement 2	Review and clarify the IPS charging policy, including exemptions from charging, and publish it (para 3.8).
Requirement 3	Provide quality indicators for published data, and ensure that they are easily accessible (para 3.11).
Requirement 4	Review the documentation of the methods used and included in, or clearly link to, <i>Travelpac</i> , and add key metadata to the tables (para 3.12).
Requirement 5	Implement ONS's plan to add commentary to <i>MQ6</i> and review the commentary in <i>Travel Trends</i> with a view to expanding it to include, for example, more discussion of trends over time (para 3.24).
Requirement 6	Review the lists of those granted pre-release access, with a view to reducing the numbers of individuals included (para 3.31).
Requirement 7	Ensure that all releases are issued at 9.30am on the day of release, by January 2011 (para 3.32).
Requirement 8	Publish a Statement of Administrative Sources, by July 2010 (para 3.35).

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 ONS's overseas travel and tourism statistics are derived from the International Passenger Survey (IPS). The IPS is a multi-purpose survey of passengers entering and leaving the UK.
- 2.2 The survey has been running continuously since 1961 and the land, sea and air routes currently covered account for approximately 99 per cent of passenger traffic into and out of the UK. Travellers passing through passport control at tunnel, sea and air routes into and out of the UK are randomly selected for interview. All interviews are conducted on a voluntary and anonymous basis. The overall response rate was 84 per cent in 2008.
- 2.3 Data are weighted to produce national estimates of all international travellers. These weights use administrative data that include coverage of the non-sampled routes and time periods.
- 2.4 Under an EU directive on tourism statistics, there is a legal requirement for the UK to deliver some of the data collected by the IPS to the European Commission. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is responsible for ensuring that the required data are collected and reported.
- 2.5 The annual cost of the IPS is approximately £6 million. The overseas travel and tourism outputs account for approximately £2 million and are funded mainly by ONS. Additional funding or sponsorship for the survey comes from other government departments including DCMS and the Department for Transport and organisations such as VisitBritain⁷, and VisitWales⁸, the organisations responsible for marketing tourism in Britain and Wales, respectively.
- 2.6 The current survey is considered to be at its limit for length of interview so new questions are balanced by equivalent deletions.
- 2.7 The overseas travel and tourism statistics are used to monitor the effectiveness of travel and tourism marketing activities and to identify trends in order to shape future policy and marketing activity. Estimates of visits to and from the UK also form an important element of the qualitative assessment by the media and other commentators of overall economic health of the UK.
- 2.8 Since the 1990s, IRN⁹ and MDS Transmodal¹⁰ have marketed IPS analysis. Such analyses are based on IPS data supplied by ONS free-of-charge. They provide bespoke analysis to businesses or individuals on a commercial basis.

⁷ <http://www.visitbritain.org/>

⁸ <http://www.visitwales.co.uk/>

⁹ <http://www.irn-research.com/>

¹⁰ <http://www.mdst.co.uk/>

3 Assessment findings

Principle 1: Meeting user needs

The production, management and dissemination of official statistics should meet the requirements of informed decision-making by government, public services, business, researchers and the public.

- 3.1 ONS engages with key users through the IPS Steering Group, which gives advice and makes recommendations about all major issues regarding both the content and methodology of the survey. Steering Group membership includes the government departments that use IPS data (including producers of the migration, balance of payments and overseas travel and tourism outputs), and some major users outside central government for example VisitBritain and the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA).
- 3.2 All Steering Group members responding to this assessment were satisfied that their needs are taken into account in running the survey and in the format, timing and content of the overseas travel and tourism outputs derived from it. For example, improvements to timeliness and an additional Monthly Bulletin in January have been introduced in response to Steering Group requests and as a benefit to all users.
- 3.3 ONS has some contact with the wider user community via the IPS Customer Response Team (CRT) which provides ad hoc analysis to users whose needs are not met by the standard outputs. Feedback is not sought from these users on their experience of the outputs, though this is being considered. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should take steps to engage more effectively with the wider user community in order to develop a more complete understanding of their needs, and make those steps known¹¹ (Requirement 1).
- 3.4 ONS statisticians have told us that they are considering enabling users to register on ONS's website as having an interest in the topic, so that news alerts could be issued directly to them. They have also considered setting up a user group for the IPS via the UK Data Archive. We suggest both of these ideas be taken forward.

¹¹ In relation to Principle 1, Practices 1, 2 and 5 of the Code of Practice

Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity

Official statistics, and information about statistical processes, should be managed impartially and objectively.

- 3.5 Each of the four outputs is published according to a pre-announced timetable.
- 3.6 Major users of these outputs, for example those represented on the Steering Group, are informed of any changes to the IPS that could lead to discontinuities or revisions well in advance of publication of the changed statistics. The wider user community is notified via ONS's website once such changes have been made. For example, *Travel Trends 2008*, published in July 2009, drew attention to the inclusion of revisions to previously published data.
- 3.7 Bespoke analysis provided by the IPS CRT is charged for using standard ONS charging rates. However, the generic email response to queries does not specify which groups are exempt from charges. We suggest that the generic email detailing the charging policy be reviewed and clarified, in the light of the activity set out in Requirement 2.
- 3.8 There is some evidence that the charges made for ad hoc analysis have impeded the use of this service. As part of this assessment we were contacted by a university student needing a more detailed analysis than was available as a standard output but who could not afford the minimum charge, and by an academic who felt that he should not be charged for data that would be used in non-funded research. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should review and clarify the IPS charging policy, including exemptions from charging, and publish it¹² (Requirement 2).

¹² In relation to Principle 2 Practice 9 of the Code of Practice

Principle 3: Integrity

At all stages in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics, the public interest should prevail over organisational, political or personal interests.

- 3.9 No incidents of political pressure, abuses of trust or complaints relating to professional integrity, quality or standards were reported to or identified by the Assessment team.
- 3.10 The IPS has been under close scrutiny in recent years because of its use in producing estimates of international migration. The Assessment team saw no evidence that this scrutiny has put undue pressure on the survey to meet the needs of migration statistics at the expense of the overseas travel and tourism needs. The Steering Group is currently jointly chaired by the person with responsibility for producing ONS's migration statistics and the person with responsibility for ONS's Tourism Intelligence Unit.

Principle 4: Sound methods and assured quality

Statistical methods should be consistent with scientific principles and internationally recognised best practices, and be fully documented. Quality should be monitored and assured taking account of internationally agreed practices.

- 3.11 The *Statistical Bulletin*, *MQ6* and *Travel Trends* all include thorough documentation about the methods underlying the IPS. ONS statisticians have told us that no data are published that are not sufficiently accurate. For bespoke analyses provided by the CRT, estimates are accompanied by the number of cases on which they are based and data considered to be less robust are flagged. Sampling errors and confidence intervals for headline variables are provided in an Appendix to *Travel Trends*. The Assessment team considers that these should be more prominent within the publication. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should provide quality indicators for published data, and ensure that they are easily accessible¹³ (Requirement 3).
- 3.12 There is no documentation of IPS methods within *Travelpac*. A *Travelpac* manual is available in pdf format on the website, but is not clearly linked to *Travelpac* itself, and appears to be out of date. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should review the documentation of the methods used and included in, or clearly link to, *Travelpac*, and add key metadata to the tables¹⁴ (Requirement 4).
- 3.13 The IPS was subject to an extensive review and redesign in 2008/9. This was driven by the need to respond to *The Port Survey Review*^{15 16} set up in response to recommendations of the Inter-departmental Task Force on Migration Statistics. The aim of the resulting redesign was to improve information about migrant respondents, and the only relevant reference to overseas travel and tourism outputs was that they should not be adversely affected.
- 3.14 Changes to the IPS sample design were made at the beginning of 2009 and announced in advance. An initial report about the size and nature of the discontinuities was made available when the first outputs from the 2009 survey were published. Further work has been carried out and details of the effect of the changes on the survey results have been published. Since the changes to sample design were made, a note has been included in the monthly and quarterly outputs drawing attention to potential discontinuities.
- 3.15 The computer processing system was also reviewed in 2008 and as a result a new system was implemented at the beginning of 2009 to ensure both greater accuracy and lower costs.
- 3.16 Quality assurance methods are fully documented and kept under review.

¹³ In relation to Principle 4 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice

¹⁴ In relation to Principle 4 Practices 1 and 2 of the Code of Practice

¹⁵ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/methodology-and-quality/imps/archive-pre-08/updates/publication-of-the-interim-report-of-the-port-survey-review.pdf>

¹⁶ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/methodology-and-quality/imps/updates-reports/port-survey-review--stage-two-progress-report.pdf>

Principle 5: Confidentiality

Private information about individual persons (including bodies corporate) compiled in the production of official statistics is confidential, and should be used for statistical purposes only.

- 3.17 ONS has assured us that it takes all necessary steps to protect the confidentiality of the data it collects. Standard ONS data security procedures are in place for the transfer of data from the interviewers. Disclosure control methods were reviewed in 2005 and the only change made was the removal of the day of interview and the day of arrival in/departure from the microdata released to users.
- 3.18 Respondents are assured by interviewers that the data they provide will be treated as strictly confidential – this assurance is repeated in the survey information leaflet available at all sampling points. Because no personal data are released this leaflet says that ‘information collected is not confidential in nature’. While the Assessment team saw no reason to doubt that the data are being treated appropriately, we suggest ONS make it clear in all the published outputs that any information that might identify respondents is removed from all records that are made available for analysis.
- 3.19 ONS is considering a proposal to collect information such as passport numbers to aid data matching for migration analysis. The Assessment team considers that this might impact on respondents’ perceptions of the confidentiality of the data they provide. We were assured that the collection of such information would be piloted and that the result of the pilot would feed into any recommendation on the collection of it. We suggest that in order to provide transparency the results of any pilot, along with the reason for collecting the additional information, should be published.

Principle 6: Proportionate burden

The cost burden on data suppliers should not be excessive and should be assessed relative to the benefits arising from the use of the statistics.

3.20 The IPS is a voluntary survey, and we were told that the interview time is kept as low as possible. The burden on individuals who respond to the survey is published in the ONS Simplification Plan¹⁷. Additional data are supplied from other sources, for example the CAA, to cover routes not included in the IPS and as part of the weighting method. These data are provided voluntarily by these organisations as they benefit from the improved quality of IPS data, which they use. ONS is charged for any additional data it requests if the supplier sees no benefit in return for providing them.

¹⁷ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=14683>

Principle 7: Resources

The resources made available for statistical activities should be sufficient to meet the requirements of this Code and should be used efficiently and effectively.

- 3.21 The work plan for these outputs is contained within the overall business plan of ONS's Social Surveys Division, the division that runs the IPS. Appropriate systems are in place to monitor expenditure. The resource made available appears to be adequate for the outputs to meet the requirements of the Code.
- 3.22 Every few years ONS reviews the design of the IPS. We were told that the changes arising from the most recent review in 2006 resulted in a fieldwork saving of approximately £400,000 with no loss of data quality.
- 3.23 A centralised recruitment process ensures that appropriately skilled people are employed in the interviewing and production processes. Appropriate competency frameworks are in place and staff are supported in developing their skills.

Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

Official statistics, accompanied by full and frank commentary, should be readily accessible to all users.

- 3.24 The *Statistical Bulletin* contains headline commentary in the form of bullet points. Neither *MQ6* nor *Travelpac* contain any commentary or analysis and *Travel Trends* has included little commentary (restricted almost entirely to the most recent year's data) since the 2006 results were published in January 2008. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should implement its plan to add commentary to *MQ6* and review the commentary in *Travel Trends* with a view to expanding it to include, for example, more discussion of trends over time¹⁸ (Requirement 5).
- 3.25 The Assessment team was told that the decision to reduce the amount of commentary in *Travel Trends* was based on the view that timeliness was more important to users than the interpretation of data. *Travel Trends 2006* was initially published without commentary to enable early release of results, with commentary published a few months later. This benefited users for whom timeliness was the main consideration but was inefficient from the producers' point of view and as a result a single *Travel Trends* publication, including limited commentary, is now published.
- 3.26 As part of an ONS policy to move to web-based publication, *Travel Trends* is only available in PDF format on the web. There are plans to scan back-issues of the publication so that they are available as a single digital archive
- 3.27 Technical terms, which may be unclear to non-expert users, are used in the publications. We suggest that the terminology in all the outputs is reviewed to ensure that it is accessible to the wider user community. We also suggest the name of *MQ6* is changed to describe more obviously what it contains. (The abbreviation *MQ6* dates from when it was part of the Quarterly Monitor series.)
- 3.28 In addition to the standard monthly, quarterly and annual outputs, users can analyse the detailed datafiles contained in *Travelpac*, request tabulations from the CRT or use the UK Data Archive. The same detailed microdata as that deposited at the archive, are also made available to two marketing agents, which provide value-added products and bespoke analysis.

¹⁸ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice

Protocol 1: User engagement

Effective user engagement is fundamental both to trust in statistics and securing maximum public value. This Protocol draws together the relevant practices set out elsewhere in the Code and expands on the requirements in relation to consultation.

3.29 The requirements for this Protocol are covered elsewhere in this report.

Protocol 2: Release practices

Statistical reports should be released into the public domain in an orderly manner that promotes public confidence and gives equal access to all, subject to relevant legislation.

- 3.30 Pre-release access is granted to three of the outputs covered by this assessment, but not to *Travelpac*. Each of the three has a different pre-release access list which are available on ONS's website, though they are difficult to find. We were told that the IPS team has pressed for clearer signposting and that this should be addressed in the redesign of ONS's website.
- 3.31 The pre-release lists have been reviewed in the last 12 months and we were told that they have been shortened considerably over the last 2 years. It is not clear to the Assessment team that pre-release access is necessary for any of these outputs. They are neither sensitive nor market-moving. This is borne out by the fact that we could find no government statements about tourism that used these statistics. The inconsistency between the lists for the three outputs also implies that there is no clear policy purpose for pre-release access. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should review the lists of those granted pre-release access, with a view to reducing the numbers of individuals included¹⁹ (Requirement 6). The same Requirement has been made in the assessment reports for ONS labour market statistics²⁰ and balance of payments statistics²¹.
- 3.32 The Code requires National Statistics releases to be issued at 9.30am on the day of publication. ONS's website systems do not enable releases to be published simultaneously, which means there is sometimes a delay beyond 9.30am. ONS informed us that this matter is being reviewed as part of the web development programme, which is due to be completed in early 2011. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should ensure all releases are issued at 9.30am on the day of release by January 2011²² (Requirement 7). The same Requirement has been made in the assessment reports for ONS labour market statistics²³ and balance of payments statistics²⁴.

¹⁹ In relation to Protocol 2 Practice 7 of the Code of Practice

²⁰ Assessment Report 34, Requirement 6, para 3.52

²¹ Assessment Report 45, Requirement 12, para 3.36

²² In relation to Protocol 2 Practice 4 of the Code of Practice

²³ Assessment Report 34, Requirement 5, para 3.51

²⁴ Assessment Report 45, Requirement 12, para 3.35

Protocol 3: The use of administrative sources for statistical purposes

Administrative sources should be fully exploited for statistical purposes, subject to adherence to appropriate safeguards.

- 3.33 The IPS uses quarterly passenger traffic data provided by the CAA, and monthly data from British Airports Authority, some of the airports themselves, the Department for Transport, Eurostar and Eurotunnel, in producing results. Administrative data are used for routes including those not covered by IPS sampling.
- 3.34 Previous reviews have considered whether any administrative sources could replace the IPS and have concluded that they could not.
- 3.35 As a department, ONS uses a lot of administrative data, and we think that it could be more pro-active in managing and developing this resource. ONS statisticians told us that they do engage with the owners of the sources they use. However, at the time of writing ONS had not published a Statement of Administrative Sources. We are not aware of a clear strategy for maximising the use of administrative data and ensuring that such sources are developed with statistical purposes in mind. As part of the designation as National Statistics, ONS should publish a Statement of Administrative Sources, by July 2010 ²⁵ (Requirement 8).

²⁵ In relation to Protocol 3 Practice 5 of the Code of Practice

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to the ONS' overseas travel and tourism 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.

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| Suggestion 1 | Take forward the ideas of enabling users to register on ONS's website as having an interest in overseas travel and tourism and setting up a user group for the IPS via the UK Data Archive (para 3.4). |
| Suggestion 2 | Review and clarify the generic email detailing the charging policy (para 3.7). |
| Suggestion 3 | ONS should make it clear in all the published outputs that any information which might identify respondents is removed from all records made available for analysis (para 3.18). |
| Suggestion 4 | Publish the results of pilots testing the collection of information such as passport numbers, and the reasons for collecting this information (para 3.19). |
| Suggestion 5 | Review the terminology in all the outputs to ensure that they are accessible to the wider user community (para 3.27) |
| Suggestion 6 | Rename MQ6 to something that describes more obviously what it contains (para 3.27). |

Annex 2: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A2.1 This assessment was conducted from February to April 2010.

A2.2 The Assessment team – Jenny Church and Elspeth Maclean – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of the ONS in February. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 16 February. The Assessment team subsequently met with the ONS during March 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

A2.3 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.

A2.4 The Assessment team received 16 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Academic	2
Devolved administrations	2
Other government departments	6
Tourist Boards	2
Other	4

A2.5 In general, users were satisfied with the comprehensiveness and presentation of the data and the commentary. For the most part, users were satisfied with the detailed analysis they were able to obtain on request. Some commented on the constraints of the sample size and asked whether there were plans to increase it. Some users reported a lack of detailed data about overseas spending because an expenditure trailer to the survey had not been carried out since 1997 due to lack of funding from stakeholders. Some also said that, ideally, they would like the annual release in particular to be available earlier. More information about accuracy was also requested. Some concern was raised about inconsistency between IPS data and other sources such as airlines.

A2.6 Users reported good email contact with the IPS team and prompt and helpful responses to queries. Those involved in the Steering Group felt that this worked well but those outside the Steering Group said that they had not been asked for feedback as users.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

