

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

## Statistics from the National Travel Survey

*(produced by the Department for Transport)*

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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 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 following outputs produced from the National Travel Survey (NTS)<sup>4</sup> by the Department for Transport (DfT):

- *National Travel Survey Statistical Release*

Topic reports:

- *Trends in driving licence holding and vehicle availability*
- *How people travel*
- *Why people travel*
- *When people travel*
- *Travel by age and gender*
- *Travel by car availability, income, ethnic group and household type*
- *Accessibility*
- *Vehicles*

Factsheets:

- *Health-related travel difficulties*
- *Travel in urban and rural areas*
- *Use of public buses*
- *Vehicles*

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 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 listed in paragraph 1.1.1 are designated as National Statistics, subject to DfT implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by February 2011 (October 2010 for Requirements 2 and 4).

## 1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

1.3.1 DfT meets the main user needs and engages with users from a range of sectors. It has conducted two user surveys and seeks user views to inform the

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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> Each NTS release is accessible through the web page:  
<http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/datatablespublications/nts/>

content of the NTS statistics. The Department could engage more actively with the wider user community and make clearer to users how the feedback has informed its statistical planning.

1.3.2 DfT presents the NTS statistics in a clear and impartial way, with commentary supported by summary charts. The releases could be strengthened with information to make clear the quality and reliability of the statistics.

1.3.3 The NTS uses robust methods that are well documented.

#### **1.4 Detailed recommendations**

1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that DfT 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>	Engage with a wider user community, report the outcomes of its user engagement, and make clear how the user feedback has informed its statistical planning (para 3.4)
<b>Requirement 2</b>	Clarify the departmental pricing policy for supplementary statistical service (para 3.7)
<b>Requirement 3</b>	Provide more information about the quality and reliability of the statistics in the <i>NTS Statistical Release</i> , topic reports and Factsheets (para 3.22)
<b>Requirement 4</b>	Revise and complete the Statement of Administrative Sources so that it identifies all of the elements required in the Code (para 3.29)

## 2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 The National Travel Survey (NTS) is a household survey designed to provide a databank of personal travel information for Great Britain. DfT releases a range of statistics on travel by key characteristics using data from the NTS. For the 2009 survey DfT published the statistics in a collection of outputs, with a headline statistics release, topic reports and detailed data tables. It released these on a dedicated web page, accompanied by a number of metadata documents. In previous years DfT published the statistics in a detailed annual report, together with the separate release of data tables. It also publishes Factsheets on personal travel and other aspects of travel in Great Britain, drawing on data from the NTS and other sources.
- 2.2 The NTS is part of a continuous survey that began in July 1988, following ad hoc surveys since the mid-1960s. Since January 2002 DfT has appointed the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), an independent social research institute, as the contractor to conduct the NTS.
- 2.3 In 2002 DfT modified the survey to incorporate recommendations from a National Statistics Quality Review<sup>5</sup>. The sample size was nearly tripled which enabled key results to be presented on a single year basis. Previously it had grouped the data from the continuous survey into three year time periods because of the smaller sample size. DfT also introduced sample weighting to reduce the effect of non-response bias and to address the drop-off in the number of trips recorded by respondents during the course of the travel week.
- 2.4 In 2009 the NTS was based on a random sample of 15,048 private households, drawn from the Postcode Address File. The sample was designed to ensure that the addresses for each quarter were representative of the population of Great Britain. A national response rate of 62 per cent was achieved in 2009.
- 2.5 NatCen collects NTS data via two main sources. It conducts face to face interviews using computer-assisted personal interviewing to collect information on the households. Key characteristics are obtained for all individual members within the household and all vehicles to which they have access. Each household member is then asked to record details of all their trips over a seven day period in a travel diary, allowing travel patterns to be linked with individual characteristics. The NTS covers travel by people of all ages, including children. The survey produces a rich dataset for analysis with information recorded at a number of different levels (household, individual, vehicle, long distance journey, day, trip and stage).
- 2.6 Data from the NTS are used extensively by DfT to monitor changes in travel patterns and to inform the development of policy. NTS forms a key input into the National Transport Model<sup>6</sup>. It is used to inform the development of government initiatives and targets including the Carbon Reduction Delivery

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/methodology-and-quality/quality/nat-stats-qual-revs/qual-revs-by-theme/travel-and-transport/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/economics/ntm/>

Plan<sup>7</sup>. The findings and data are also used by a variety of other users, including: other government departments, the Transport Statistics User Group (TSUG), university academics and students, transport consultants, local authorities and organisations representing a broad range of interests including motorists, cyclists, the elderly, rural communities and children.

- 2.7 The staff cost to DfT of producing the statistics from the NTS is 4 full time equivalent staff.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/sustainable/>

### 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 DfT has published a User Service Statement<sup>8</sup> setting out the mechanisms by which it engages with users. The Department discusses its plans and developments across the range of its statistics, including the NTS, with two established user groups: the Transport Statistics User Group (TSUG)<sup>9</sup> and the Central and Local (Government) Information Partnership Transport Sub-group (CLIP-TS)<sup>10</sup>. TSUG is an independent group which holds regular seminars and produces a newsletter. Its membership includes transport operators, manufacturers, trade associations, consultants, universities, local authorities and research organisations. CLIP-TS meets quarterly and provides a forum for local government users and data suppliers to comment on and discuss transport statistics. Its membership also includes passenger transport authorities.
- 3.2 DfT publishes a technical report<sup>11</sup> that details the uses made of the NTS data. DfT has conducted two requirement surveys for users of the NTS in recent years and maintains a log of email enquiries. It has used these sources to inform the content of the survey and its outputs.
- 3.3 DfT is currently consulting users on the form and content of the latest NTS release, which it has published through a collection of outputs via its NTS statistics web page and which replaces the PDF survey report. The Department did not consult users on the proposed changes, although it informed those on its mailing list that it was changing the nature of the NTS publication prior to the release of the statistics. The Department told us that the user feedback will inform its future publication of statistics online.
- 3.4 While DfT regularly consults known users of the NTS in a variety of ways, it does not make clear to users the changes it has made as a result of their feedback. Also it has not identified or proactively engaged users in the wider community. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DfT should engage with a wider user community, report the outcomes of its user engagement, and make clear how the user feedback has informed its statistical planning<sup>12</sup> (Requirement 1).

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/standardsreview/userservice.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.tsug.org.uk/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/committeesusergroups/centralandlocalgovernmentinf5088>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/datatablespublications/nts/technical/nts2009technical.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> In relation to Principle 1, Practices 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 DfT publishes the NTS statistics in an impartial and orderly manner. The statistics are available free of charge on DfT's website and via the National Statistics Publication Hub.
- 3.6 DfT published its revisions policy<sup>13</sup> in February 2010.
- 3.7 DfT told us that it doesn't usually charge for supplementary statistical services, but may do so for particularly large or complex requests. There are currently no formal guidelines in DfT on what would constitute a large or complex request. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DfT should clarify its pricing policy for supplementary statistical services<sup>14</sup> (Requirement 2). This requirement is the same as that made in an earlier assessment report<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/standardsreview/revisionpolicy.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> In relation to Principle 2, Practice 9 of the Code of Practice

<sup>15</sup> Statistics on Road Conditions in England, Assessment Report 40, May 2010

### **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.**

- 3.8 No incidents of political pressures, abuses or complaints relating to professional integrity, quality or standards were reported to or identified by the Assessment team.

## 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.**

- 3.9 Data collection for the NTS is currently carried out by NatCen. DfT undertakes the data analysis, publication and archiving. The Technical Report<sup>16</sup> describes the methodology used for sampling, survey design and weighting. It includes details of any changes to the methods and the reasons for such changes. Summary information on definitions and changes to methods is published in *Notes and Definitions*<sup>17</sup>, which is available through the NTS statistics web page and via a link in each Excel data table file. *Notes and Definitions* also has an explanation of sampling errors and guidance on the interpretation of the data. DfT has published a method report<sup>18</sup> and Excel tables<sup>19</sup> giving sampling errors for the weighted NTS data.
- 3.10 The technical reports for earlier years are also available through the NTS statistics web page. These include additional useful material; for example, the *2008 Technical Report*<sup>20</sup> included an investigation into the reasons for the under-reporting of short trips in the 2007 diary, a list of differences from past travel surveys, and a comparison of NTS data with other sources. We suggest that DfT signpost users to the additional content in technical reports on the NTS statistics web page.
- 3.11 NatCen provides extensive quality assurance documentation and training guidelines for its interviewers. DfT told us that it provides desk-notes for the statistical team preparing the NTS statistics. DfT has published a statistical policy *Statement on Quality Strategy Principles and Procedures*<sup>21</sup> which sets out quality guidelines.
- 3.12 The NTS coverage is for Great Britain. The Department for Regional Development conducts a separate travel survey in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland travel survey is modelled on the NTS, and we suggest that DfT work with the Department for Regional Development Northern Ireland to identify whether consistent UK figures can be provided.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/datatablespublications/nts/technical/nts2009technical.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/datatablespublications/nts/technical/nts2009notes.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/datatablespublications/nts/technical/stderror2009.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/datatablespublications/nts/technical/stderror2009.xls>

<sup>20</sup> <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/datatablespublications/personal/methodology/ntstechreports/ntstechrep2008>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/standardsreview/qualitystrategy.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.**

3.13 DfT has assured us that it takes all necessary steps to protect the confidentiality of the data it collects. NatCen has documented its procedures for ensuring that confidential information is protected. It also informs respondents about how it keeps their personal data securely. DfT told us that it is also committed to protecting confidential information and requires each member of staff to attend training on protecting information.

## 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.**

- 3.14 DfT has published a statement of the costs of responding to its surveys by businesses and local authorities<sup>22</sup>. It told us that it is looking to extend this information to include the burden to individual people.
- 3.15 DfT told us that it reviews the content of the survey each year with NatCen. DfT stopped collecting postcoded origin and destinations data from 2008, to reduce the burden on respondents. DfT has also obtained vehicle information (such as engine size, type of fuel used and taxation class) from DVLA since 2002, to shorten the interview.

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/standardsreview/surveycompliancecosts.pdf>

## 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.**

- 3.16 There are four main statistics teams in DfT, embedded within policy directorates. We were told that separate business plans are held for each of these directorates, and these plans include details of the allocation of resources to statistics.
- 3.17 DfT informed us that its Directors hold monthly meetings to discuss finances and staffing and that staff resources for statistics are managed on a day to day basis by a Transport Statistics Management Group. This group produces a transport statistics business plan which seeks to identify areas where there are pressures to meet new and changing demands or a need for long term investment.
- 3.18 We have been assured that statistical work complies with departmental arrangements for financial stewardship and procurement.
- 3.19 Appropriate recruitment and development policies are in place to ensure that suitably skilled people are employed in the statistical production process. These policies include the completion of Continuous Professional Development logs, personal development plans and a system of mentoring.

## Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

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

- 3.20 DfT published the NTS statistics for 2009 on its website through a collection of outputs, which included a headline statistics release<sup>23</sup> and topic reports. Each of these included commentary, presenting the main findings in an accessible style. DfT could strengthen the commentary by explaining the reasons for change in the statistics, and policy context, to help users interpret the figures. These releases contain summary charts and signpost users to the relevant detailed data tables. DfT released around 100 data tables in Excel spreadsheets. These are well presented and have background information with links to *Notes and Definitions*.
- 3.21 DfT also releases Factsheets<sup>24</sup> that summarise findings from the NTS and other sources on important aspects of travel. The Factsheets also provide an accessible commentary supported by illustrative charts.
- 3.22 These NTS statistical releases do not give sufficient information on the reliability of the statistics, and the topic reports and Factsheets do not reference *Notes and Definitions*. DfT published sampling errors for the weighted data in September 2010. These also include confidence intervals and design-effects for key statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DfT should provide more information about the quality and reliability of the statistics in the *NTS Statistical Release*, topic reports and Factsheets<sup>25</sup> (Requirement 3).
- 3.23 DfT deposits a non-disclosive version of the NTS dataset at the UK Data Archive. A copy of this dataset is also available on CD from the NTS team on request. Both require a signed end-user agreement. DfT is considering options for making a similar dataset publicly available via data.gov.uk or a similar portal.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/datatablespublications/nts/latest/nts2009-01.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/datatablespublications/nts/>

<sup>25</sup> In relation to Principle 8, Practice 1 and Principle 4 , 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.**

3.24 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.**

- 3.25 The statistics are released according to a published timetable and are accessible from the DfT website and the National Statistics Publication Hub. The Factsheets are produced on an ad hoc basis in response to emerging issues or public interest. Their production is dependent on the available resources in the NTS team. DfT informs users on its mailing list about the publication of the latest statistics.
- 3.26 DfT publishes a list of those who had pre-release access to the statistics on the NTS statistics web page<sup>26</sup>.
- 3.27 The *NTS Statistical Release* includes the name and contact details of the responsible statistician. There is also a telephone contact number and NTS team email address at the foot of each table. We suggest that DfT make clear that the named 'public enquiries' contact is the responsible statistician in the *NTS Statistical Release*.

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/statistics/datatablespublications/nts/technical/nts2009prerelease.pdf>

### **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.**

- 3.28 DfT compiles the NTS statistics mainly from survey questionnaire and diary data gathered by NatCen. This is supplemented with DVLA administrative vehicle information where respondents agree to provide their vehicle registration number.
- 3.29 DfT has published a general overview of administrative sources, with detailed statements about four data sources. It plans to add a wider range of administrative systems to this list. There are also other elements required by the Code which are missing from the statement. As part of the designation as National Statistics, DfT should revise and complete its Statement of Administrative Sources so that it identifies all of the elements required in the Code<sup>27</sup> (Requirement 4). This requirement is the same as that made in an earlier assessment report<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> In relation to Protocol 3 Practice 5 of the Code of Practice

<sup>28</sup> Statistics on Road Conditions in England, Assessment Report 40, May 2010

## Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to DfT's NTS 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> | Signpost users to the additional content in technical reports on the NTS statistics web page (para 3.10)                                   |
| <b>Suggestion 2</b> | Work with the Department for Regional Development (Northern Ireland) to identify whether consistent UK figures can be provided (para 3.12) |
| <b>Suggestion 3</b> | Make clear that the named 'public enquiries' contact is the responsible statistician in the <i>NTS Statistical Release</i> (para 3.27)     |

## Annex 2: Summary of assessment process and users' views

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

A2.2 The Assessment team – Penny Babb and Elspeth Maclean – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of the Department for Transport in April 2010. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 23 April. The Assessment team subsequently met the Department for Transport during August 2010 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 14 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Academic	3
Department for Transport	2
Other Central / Local Government	3
Devolved Administrations	3
Other	3

A2.5 Data users were positive about their contact with the NTS team and found them approachable and helpful. In general users were satisfied with the NTS and the presentation of the data<sup>29</sup>. There were however suggestions for areas where the survey could be expanded, such as the inclusion of international air travel and larger samples to allow analysis at finer areas and populations. Alternative age groupings that match road casualty data, the inclusion of a measure of error (confidence intervals) and linking NTS data with data from other sources, for example domestic flights and socio-economic status, were amongst other possible improvements suggested by users.

A2.6 Users found the Factsheets useful and would like them to be produced and updated more frequently.

### Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

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<sup>29</sup> Feedback was received from users before NTS 2009 results were released. Therefore they do not relate to the web based release.



