

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

## Forestry Statistics

*(produced by the Forestry Commission)*

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

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

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

The Statistics Authority has two main functions:

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

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

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## ASSESSMENT AND DESIGNATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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# 1 Summary of findings

## 1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 This is one of a series of reports<sup>1</sup> prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*<sup>2</sup>. The Act requires all statistics currently designated as National Statistics to be assessed against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*<sup>3</sup>. The report covers the following sets of statistics produced by the Forestry Commission (FC):

- *UK Wood Production and Trade*<sup>4</sup> (*Wood Production*);
- *Timber Price Indices*<sup>5</sup> (*TPI*);
- *Woodland Area, Planting and Restocking*<sup>6</sup> (*Woodland Area*);
- *Forestry Statistics*<sup>7</sup>; and
- *Forestry Facts and Figures*<sup>8</sup>.

1.1.2 *Forestry Statistics* and *Forestry Facts and Figures* are compendium publications. Assessments of compendium publications against the *Code of Practice* relate to the processes involved in preparing the publication, rather than in producing the statistics that are included. Those sets of statistics will normally be subject to separate assessment. Designation of a compendium publication as National Statistics therefore means that the producer body has, for example: identified and met user needs in terms of the content of the publication; considered the appropriateness of each series for inclusion; and written appropriate commentary.

1.1.3 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 FC implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by May 2012.

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

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

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

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

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-7aq15b>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/forestry.nsf/byunique/infd-7m2djr>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-7aqknx>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-7aqdgc>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-7aqf6j>

### 1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

- 1.3.1 FC has a forum for engaging with users of these statistics from the timber trade. It conducted a user survey over summer 2011 and is taking steps to improve the way it engages with the wider user community, in response to the survey.
- 1.3.2 FC publishes a statistical work plan every year, which provides a clear outline of its objectives. At the end of the year it publishes a report of its progress against the work plan.
- 1.3.3 FC publishes some useful information about the quality of its surveys, but it should publish more information about the limitations in relation to the use of the statistics. FC does not publish sufficient information about the methods used to produce these statistics or the nature and extent of revisions. There is room for more commentary and contextual information to support the use of the statistics. The statistics are not very accessible on FC's website.

### 1.4 Detailed recommendations

- 1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that FC 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>	Confirm that future changes to the methods used to produce these statistics will be announced well in advance of the changed statistics (para 3.6).
<b>Requirement 2</b>	(i) Explain the nature and extent of revisions at the same time that revised statistics are released, and (ii) Indicate clearly which of the statistics are new (para 3.7).
<b>Requirement 3</b>	Publish more information about the methods used to produce <i>Wood Production</i> , <i>Woodland Area</i> and <i>TPI</i> and make the information accessible (para 3.10).
<b>Requirement 4</b>	Provide more information about the quality of its statistics in relation to use and potential use (para 3.11).
<b>Requirement 5</b>	Indicate clearly which statistics in <i>Forestry Statistics</i> and <i>Forestry Facts and Figures</i> are not National Statistics and ensure that they are of sufficient quality to meet users' needs (para 3.13).

- Requirement 6** Investigate the feasibility of producing consistent historical data when methods are revised (para 3.15).
- Requirement 7** Improve the commentary and contextual information in the releases so that it aids user understanding (para 3.22).
- Requirement 8** Improve the accessibility of the statistics on FC's website (para 3.24).
- Requirement 9** Expand the Statement of Administrative Sources so that it covers all of the elements required by the *Code* (para 3.29).



## 2 Subject of the assessment

2.1 The Forestry Commission (FC) is a non-ministerial government department responsible for the protection and expansion of Great Britain's (GB) forests and woodland. It manages almost one million hectares of land. The Forestry Commission has National Offices in England, Wales and Scotland, but all the National Statistics are produced by a central team. Many of the published statistics incorporate statistics from the Northern Ireland Forest Service and so cover the UK.

2.2 FC uses statistics on forests and woodlands to develop and monitor its policies, allocate grants, and to promote the benefits of forests. The statistics provide information about the extent of UK woodland and the state of the timber industry and so are important within the industry and to other government departments. More widely, the statistics are of interest to organisations concerned with nature conservation, ecology and biodiversity; organisations working to protect forests and woodlands from pests and diseases; and public and private investors in the countryside.

2.3 This report covers all FC's National Statistics.

- *UK Wood Production and Trade (Wood Production)* is an annual publication. It presents statistics on the removal of wood from UK woodlands, the destination of the wood (type of processing plant) and the resulting wood products. It was first published in 2002. FC collects data for the publication through annual surveys of the UK timber industry. The publication also includes statistics on imports and exports of wood and wood products, based on overseas trade statistics published by HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC). Statistics on wood production are required by Eurostat as part of the Joint Forest Sector Questionnaire<sup>9</sup>.
- *Timber Price Indices (TPI)* is published twice-yearly. It provides two indices – the coniferous standing sales price index (CSSPI) and the softwood sawlog price index (SSPI) – that are used to monitor trends in timber prices and to provide information about the state of the GB timber industry. The indices are based on data from FC's administrative records of timber sales. CSSPI was first published in the 1950s and SSPI was first published in the 1980s. The two indices were first published together in *TPI* in 2004. The methods used to calculate the CSSPI were reviewed and revised in 2008.
- *Woodland Area, Planting and Restocking (Woodland Area)* is an annual release. It presents statistics about the extent of woodland, the creation of new areas of woodland and the restocking of existing woodland that has been harvested. It includes information about the extent of certified woodland (where forest management practices have been assessed against the UK Woodland Assurance Standard<sup>10</sup>). The statistics are based

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<sup>9</sup> The joint forest sector questionnaire is an initiative of the International Tropical Timber Organization, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and Eurostat to collect statistics on the world timber situation. Each agency collects data from the countries for which it is responsible, with Eurostat compiling information from EU Member States.

<sup>10</sup> <http://ukwas.org.uk/>

on FC's own administrative records, the Northern Ireland Forest Service's administrative records, the Forest Stewardship Council (for data on certificated woodland) and periodic surveys (inventories) of forests and woodland across GB. Statistics on woodland area have been produced since 1919 and inventories have been run in GB about every 15 years. Unlike previous inventories, the current inventory (the National Forest Inventory<sup>11</sup>) is a rolling continuous survey. It began in 2009 and will be completed in 2014, at which point the second survey cycle will begin. The previous inventory was carried out between 1995 and 1999. Statistics on new planting and restocking have been published since 1919, and in their current format since 1976. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) requires statistics on woodland area for its five-yearly *Global Forest Resources Assessment*<sup>12</sup> and statistics on woodland area and wood production contribute to a four-yearly report: *State of Europe's Forests*<sup>13</sup>.

- *Forestry Statistics* is the main annual compendium publication. It covers a wide range of statistics about woodland, forestry and primary wood processing in the UK. It includes key statistics from the publications outlined above and some non-National Statistics, which are included to provide a more complete picture, for example about the woodland environment, woodland as a source of recreation and international forestry. It was first produced in 2001.
- *Forestry Facts and Figures* is an annual summary booklet, presenting an extract of the key statistics from *Forestry Statistics*. It is published at the same time as *Forestry Statistics* and is designed to provide users with a quick reference guide to the key statistics. It has been produced since the mid-1970s, originally to accompany FC's annual report and accounts.

2.4 FC estimates that these statistics take about one person-year to produce. This includes running the surveys that underpin *Wood Production*.

2.5 The Forestry Commission's National Offices produce some Official Statistics on woodland and forestry<sup>14</sup> for their respective regions. The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has responsibility for forestry in England as well as certain activities, such as international affairs, which remain reserved by Westminster. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) publishes related statistics on changes in land use<sup>15</sup>, which includes information about the woodland area.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/inventory>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.fao.org/forestry/fra/en/>

<sup>13</sup>

[http://www.foresteurope.org/eng/Commitments/Documents/Reporting\\_on\\_Sustainable\\_Forest\\_Management/](http://www.foresteurope.org/eng/Commitments/Documents/Reporting_on_Sustainable_Forest_Management/)

<sup>14</sup> For example <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-7awmz2>

<sup>15</sup>

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/planningbuilding/planningstatistics/landusechange/>

### 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 FC's main forum for engaging with users of its statistics within FC and from the timber industry is through the Expert Group on Timber and Trade Statistics<sup>16</sup> (EGTTS). The group meets three times a year to discuss and advise on the production of statistics about the timber trade. It quality assures statistics and assesses the need for new statistics. Members are nominated by trade associations.
- 3.2 During June and July 2011, FC conducted a survey of users of its statistics. It has published the findings<sup>17</sup> and an implementation plan<sup>18</sup> which explains how it will address the recommendations arising from the survey.
- 3.3 FC publishes an annual statistics work plan<sup>19</sup>. At the end of each year it publishes a report<sup>20</sup> of its progress against the work plan.
- 3.4 FC has a section on its website that explains who uses the statistics and how it engages users. This includes clear links to information about EGTTS, including its terms of reference, membership and minutes of meetings, and to FC's work plans. On its website, FC requests users' views to help it develop its work plans. However, the work plans do not explain what changes have been made as a result of the views that are received. We suggest that FC include in its work plans an explanation of any changes it has introduced in response to user feedback. This may in turn encourage more user feedback.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/INFD-5RABJ3>

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/FCPublications\\_User\\_Survey\\_Oct2011.pdf/\\$FILE/FCPublications\\_User\\_Survey\\_Oct2011.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/FCPublications_User_Survey_Oct2011.pdf/$FILE/FCPublications_User_Survey_Oct2011.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/UES2011imp\\_plan.pdf/\\$FILE/UES2011imp\\_plan.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/UES2011imp_plan.pdf/$FILE/UES2011imp_plan.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/forestry.nsf/byunique/infd-7r4jsr>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/forestry.nsf/byunique/infd-7r4jsr>

## Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity

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

- 3.5 FC presents its statistics impartially and objectively.
- 3.6 FC usually announces changes to methods in advance: for example, when it changed the method used to produce CSSPI it published a detailed explanatory article before publishing the changed statistics. It told us that it will be publishing an article to explain forthcoming changes to its survey of private sector softwood removal, which feeds into *Wood Production*. However, it has not consistently announced changes in advance: in June 2011 it started using the National Forest Inventory as the basis for its woodland area statistics, leading to a discontinuity in the series. Although it has explained this change and provided statistics on both the new and old basis, the change was not pre-announced. The change affected the definition of woodland and led to some quite significant revisions. As part of the designation as National Statistics, FC should confirm that future changes to the methods used to produce these statistics will be announced well in advance of the changed statistics<sup>21</sup> (Requirement 1).
- 3.7 The statistics FC publishes in *Wood Production* and *Woodland Area* are provisional. FC updates these statistics when it includes them in the annual compendium publication *Forestry Statistics*. However, in *Forestry Statistics* it does not provide any information about the nature or extent of the revisions and it is not clear which of the statistics presented are new. As part of the designation as National Statistics, FC should (i) explain the nature and extent of revisions at the same time that revised statistics are released, and (ii) indicate clearly which of the statistics are new<sup>22</sup> (Requirement 2).

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<sup>21</sup> In relation to Principle 2, Practice 4 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>22</sup> In relation to Principle 2, Practice 6 and Principle 8 Practice 4 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.**

- 3.8 No incidents of political pressures, abuses of trust or complaints relating to professional integrity, quality or standards were reported to or identified by the Assessment team.
- 3.9 FC has a statistics Lead Official responsible for the production and publication of statistical outputs and for ensuring compliance with the *Code*. The Lead Official is not a member of the Senior Civil Service. This could limit their effectiveness if a threat to the integrity of these statistics were to arise. The Lead Official told us that there have been no incidents of political pressure, but FC has anyway established professional links with the statistical Head of Profession in DEFRA in order to mitigate this risk.

## 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.**

- 3.10 FC publishes some information about the methods used to produce these statistics. For example, *Forestry Statistics* includes information about the data sources that underpin the statistics. FC has published a technical article explaining the methods behind CPSSI, and has published *Quality Reports*<sup>23</sup> for the surveys that underpin *Wood Production*, which provide summary information about the survey methods. However, the information is not complete or sufficiently accessible. For example, *Wood Production* does not explain how the different surveys are used to produce the statistics; and *Wood Production*, *Woodland Area* and *TPI* do not refer, or link, to the information on data sources available in *Forestry Statistics*. As part of the designation as National Statistics, FC should publish more information about the methods used to produce *Wood Production*, *Woodland Area* and *TPI* and make the information accessible<sup>24</sup> (Requirement 3).
- 3.11 FC publishes a *Quality Report*<sup>25</sup> for each publication and for each survey that underpins its statistics. These provide some useful information about different aspects of the quality of its statistics, but there is not enough information about quality in relation to the potential use. For example, there is information on possible sources (and size) of bias in the *Quality Reports* for each survey, but FC does not explain the impact on the statistics in *Wood Production*, *Woodland Area* and *TPI*. *Woodland Area* provides a time series from 1086 but does not provide sufficient information to help users interpret the series – for example about the quality of these statistics. *Wood Production* includes statistics from HMRC and notes that it has concerns about the reliability of some of the statistics, but does not explain what the concerns are or the impact for users. As part of the designation as National Statistics, FC should provide more information about the quality of its statistics in relation to use and potential use<sup>26</sup> (Requirement 4).
- 3.12 FC's statistics on woodland area are based on the most recent woodland inventory, supplemented with information about woodland creation from its own records and grants that it administers. No adjustment is made for loss of woodland (through felling and conversion to another land use). FC told us that this reflects a lack of information about woodland loss. It has investigated<sup>27</sup> other possible sources of information on woodland loss, including DCLG's statistics on changes in land use and the Countryside Survey<sup>28</sup>, but has been unable to find a suitable measure. This shortcoming is explained in footnotes to the relevant tables, and to some extent is addressed with each new inventory –

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/forestry.nsf/byunique/infd-7zhk85>

<sup>24</sup> In relation to Principle 4, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/forestry.nsf/byunique/infd-7zhk85>

<sup>26</sup> In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, section A3 in *UK Indicators of Sustainable Forestry* [http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/pdf.nsf/pdf/fullsfi.pdf/\\$FILE/fullsfi.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/pdf.nsf/pdf/fullsfi.pdf/$FILE/fullsfi.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.countrysidesurvey.org.uk/>

although changes to both the methods and definitions used for each new inventory impact on the conclusions that can be drawn about woodland loss. Given the potential importance of woodland loss to the quality of the statistics, we suggest that FC consult widely to gather new ideas about how an affordable measure of woodland loss could be obtained, and publish a plan for improvement.

- 3.13 *Forestry Statistics* and *Forestry Facts and Figures* include some statistics that are not National Statistics, but which are included to provide a more complete picture of woodland and forestry in the UK. This is helpful. FC explains where the statistics are not National Statistics in a footnote to the relevant tables. However, this explanation should be more prominent. As part of the designation as National Statistics, FC should indicate clearly which statistics in *Forestry Statistics* and *Forestry Facts and Figures* are not National Statistics and ensure that they are of sufficient quality to meet users' needs<sup>29</sup> (Requirement 5).
- 3.14 FC supplies statistics on wood production to Eurostat and woodland area to FAO. The definition of woodland used in the UK is slightly different from the standard international definition. FC told us that the UK definition is more cost-effective to measure and that the discrepancy does not have a significant impact. We were told that FC is able to convert its estimates to the international definition, if required. FC explains the different definitions in *Forestry Statistics* and the *Quality Report* that accompanies *Woodland Area*. The information about the size of the difference is published separately, within the information<sup>30</sup> submitted to FAO. We suggest that FC make information about the impact of different definitions used in UK and international statistics more accessible.
- 3.15 FC has not always produced consistent historical data when it has revised methods. For example, when it began using woodland area from the National Forest Inventory it provided statistics on both the old and new basis, but didn't produce a consistent time series. As part of the designation as National Statistics, FC should investigate the feasibility of producing consistent historical data when methods are revised<sup>31</sup> (Requirement 6).
- 3.16 FC undertook a review of the methods it uses to produce these statistics in 2002. It published the findings<sup>32</sup> of the review. It told us that it has no plans for future reviews – although different aspects of methods are reviewed, usually in response to discussions at EGTTs, and where necessary improvements have been introduced. We suggest that FC put in place formal arrangements for reviewing the methods used to produce these statistics and publish relevant plans.

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<sup>29</sup> In relation to Principle 4, Practices 1 and 2 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-7z8k3k> Table 1 Section 1.5

<sup>31</sup> In relation to Principle 4, Practice 7 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/forestry.nsf/byunique/ahen-589ddl>

## 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 FC has assured us that it takes all necessary steps to protect the confidentiality of the data it collects. It has published a data confidentiality statement<sup>33</sup> that outlines how it keeps confidential data secure and the arrangements for providing controlled access to microdata.

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/forestry.nsf/byunique/infd-7zxf3b>



## 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.**

- 3.18 FC has published information about its survey control processes<sup>34</sup> and it reports annually the estimated costs of responding to its statistical surveys.
- 3.19 When FC writes to businesses to invite them to respond to its statistical surveys it provides some information to explain how the statistics will be used but there is room for more - in order to encourage greater voluntary response. We suggest that FC expand the information about the use and importance of its statistics in the covering letters that it sends to the businesses selected for its surveys.
- 3.20 When FC started a new survey on wood pellet production it told us that it evaluated the existing sources (through discussion at EGTTS) before starting the survey.

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/forestry.nsf/byunique/inf-d-6tzkzg>

## 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 These statistics are produced by a small team of statisticians in FC. FC told us that it is sufficiently resourced to produce these statistics. It publishes an annual work plan, which reflects feedback it has received from users. FC has close links with the Scottish Government's Statistician Group, which ensures that FC's staff have the opportunity to attend relevant statistical seminars to further their professional development.

## Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

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

- 3.22 FC provides commentary in these publications that highlights some of the findings (although as a summary publication, *Forestry Facts and Figures* refers to *Forestry Statistics* for the relevant commentary). However, the publications do not provide sufficient contextual information and they use technical language that is not explained. For example, no information is given to explain how the trends in the statistics have been influenced by the availability of grants or other incentives. There is no explanation of the factors underlying the long-term increase in woodland area. *Woodland Area* provides commentary about the main changes in woodland area, by type of tree, but does not explain what conclusions can (or can't) be drawn about the net gain or loss of woodland, and whether there is any shift towards a different type of woodland. As part of the designation as National Statistics, FC should improve the commentary and contextual information in the releases so that it aids user understanding<sup>35</sup> (Requirement 7). We suggest that FC consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve the statistical releases.
- 3.23 When FC changed the methods used to produce CSSPI it published the index in *TPI* based on both the new and old methods, and has committed to publishing both versions of the index for five years. This provides continuity for users; FC told us that the index is used to adjust long-term contracts, so continuity is especially important. However, including two versions of the indices throughout *TPI* is likely to be confusing for non-expert users. We suggest that FC review how the old version of CSSPI is presented in *TPI*.
- 3.24 FC's website provides useful information to support the statistics, including the *Quality Reports*, statements about revisions and confidentiality, time series data, and information about statistical reviews and survey control. However, some of this information could be more accessible, for example, by improving links to Excel tables and improving links between different topics. Information about statistics is not very accessible from FC's homepage. As part of the designation as National Statistics, FC should improve the accessibility of the statistics on its website<sup>36</sup> (Requirement 8).
- 3.25 FC confirmed that it is investigating options for archiving its statistics.

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<sup>35</sup> In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

<sup>36</sup> In relation to Principle 8, Practice 4 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.**

3.26 FC told us that it consults EGTTs about possible changes to the methods used to produce these statistics. While this is good practice, we suggest that FC consult users more widely before introducing changes, for example, by including a notice in the relevant publication and inviting feedback.

## 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.**

- 3.27 FC told us that it is reviewing the timing of its releases, following the feedback it received in response to its user consultation. There is scope for some of the statistics to be more timely, but FC told us this would impact on the timeliness of other work, reflecting the limited capacity of the small statistics team.
- 3.28 FC does not provide anyone with pre-release access to these publications in their final form. We regard this as good practice.

### **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.**

3.29 FC has published a Statement of Administrative Sources<sup>37</sup> and has published some more detailed information about each administrative source it uses. However, it has not documented the arrangements for auditing the quality of the administrative sources it uses. As part of the designation as National Statistics, FC should expand its Statement of Administrative Sources so that it covers all of the elements required by the Code<sup>38</sup> (Requirement 9).

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<sup>37</sup> <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/website/forestry.nsf/byunique/infd-832ey5>

<sup>38</sup> 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 FC's forestry statistics, in the interest of the public good. These are not formally required for designation, but the Assessment team considers that their implementation will improve public confidence in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics.

- |                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| <b>Suggestion 1</b> | Include in work plans an explanation of any changes introduced in response to user feedback (para 3.4).   |
| <b>Suggestion 2</b> | Consult widely to gather new ideas on how an affordable measure of woodland loss could be obtained and publish a plan for improvement (para 3.12).                  |
| <b>Suggestion 3</b> | Make information about the impact of different definitions used in UK and international statistics more accessible (para 3.14).                                     |
| <b>Suggestion 4</b> | Put in place formal arrangements for reviewing the methods used to produce these statistics and publish relevant plans (para 3.16).                                 |
| <b>Suggestion 5</b> | Expand the information about the use and importance of the statistics in the covering letters that are sent to the businesses selected for the surveys (para 3.19). |
| <b>Suggestion 6</b> | Consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve the statistical releases (para 3.22).  |
| <b>Suggestion 7</b> | Review how the old version of CSSPI is presented in <i>TPI</i> (para 3.23).   |
| <b>Suggestion 8</b> | Consult users more widely before introducing changes, for example, by including a notice in the relevant publication and inviting feedback (para 3.26).             |

## **Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Releases**

A2.1 In October 2010, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Releases*<sup>39</sup>. Whilst this is not part of the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*, the Authority regards it as advice that will promote both understanding and compliance with the *Code*. In relation to the statistical releases associated with Forestry 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 releases, we encourage the producer body to apply the standards as fully as possible.

### **Appropriate identification of the statistics being released**

A2.3 *Forestry Statistics*, *TPI*, *Wood Production*, and *Woodland Area* state the coverage of the release on the cover page along with the appropriate logos and (except *Forest Statistics*) the contact details for the responsible statistician and the time period to which the statistics relate. *Forestry Statistics* includes this information within the introduction to the publication. *Forestry Facts and Figures* does not include information on the coverage of the release on the cover page.

A2.4 *Forestry Statistics* and *Forestry Facts and Figures* include some statistics that are not National Statistics. FC explains that these are not National Statistics in the accompanying footnotes but the status of these statistics should be made clearer to the user.

A2.5 The releases set out the content of each release and the sources used. Releases should include information about the frequency of the release and the frequency with which the data are compiled or updated.

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

A2.6 *TPI*, *Wood Production*, and *Woodland Area* include a summary of the main findings. The *Forestry Statistics* compendium does not provide this, either at the outset or to accompany each chapter of the publication.

A2.7 Headings to sections, charts and tables are clear but often use technical terms or terms where users may not be aware there is a technical definition – for example, ‘woodland’. Some of these definitions are covered in background notes to the releases but they should be explained in the text to aid interpretation and clarity.

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

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<sup>39</sup> <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>



A2.8 The releases are impartial, objective and evidence-based. Descriptions of data are consistent with the statistics.

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

A2.9 The releases include commentary but there is insufficient context provided or information on the uses of the statistics – for example, the commentary about changes in woodland area, planting and restocking does not explain the conclusions that can be drawn from any increase or decrease and what consequences a change in the balance of woodland types would have.

A2.10 The quality reports for each survey set out information about possible sources of bias and the scale of these for each survey but the impact on the published statistics is not always explained.

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

A2.11 The background notes to the releases contain information about the sources and the calculation of the statistics and links to further information on FC's website, such as *Quality Reports* and revisions policies. Headings and topics differ between the releases; it would be helpful to users to have consistency in the information and headings presented in these sections.

A2.12 Where data are provisional and subject to revisions, this is marked accordingly but the releases do not provide information about the nature or scale of the revisions when these are introduced.

A2.13 Data are used for international comparisons and FC set out the different definitions in *Forestry Statistics* and the *Quality Report for Woodland Area*. It would be helpful to include numerical comparisons of these differences.

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

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from November 2011 to February 2012.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Jacob Wilcock and Neil Wilson – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of the Forestry Commission in early November. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 11 November 2011. The Assessment team subsequently met the Forestry Commission later during November 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 18 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Forestry Commission	7
Other government	3
Third sector	3
Consultancy	2
Trade	1
Media	1
Academia	1

A3.5 Users reported that these statistics are important to their work. For example, the statistics are used to:

- provide the context for projects focused on individual areas of woodland;
- help explain trends in species and habitats;
- monitor progress towards targets;
- lobbying; and
- feed into other reports about the state of the UK's resources.

All the publications are used. Some users particularly valued *Forestry Facts and Figures* as a quick reference guide to the key statistics.

A3.6 Users were largely happy that the statistics meet their needs. However, some users expressed concern at the lack of information about woodland loss, and the reliance on infrequent inventories to provide an updated picture of woodland area that takes account of woodland loss. Some users felt that there was a need for more information about methods and quality, including

improved descriptions of the categories and terms that are used and information about response rates. Three users requested more statistics about woodfuel, for example by type of wood and consumption (industry or private households). FC told us that it has investigated options for publishing statistics about woodfuel and it is hoping to introduce some developments based on existing sources. One user suggested that *Forestry Statistics* would benefit from an index.

A3.7 Many users commented that the FC statistics team is helpful, for example when responding to requests. Some users commented that they haven't been engaged by FC, while one noted that FC had begun consulting them during 2011 and welcomed this.

### **Key documents/links provided**

Written Evidence for Assessment document



