

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Engagement with the Natural Environment *(produced by Natural England)*

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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

Statistics on Engagement with the Natural Environment

(produced by Natural England)

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 reports¹ prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*². The Act allows an appropriate authority³ to request an assessment of official statistics against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*⁴ in order for them to gain National Statistics status. This report is in response to such a request. The report covers the sets of statistics about engagement with the natural environment produced by Natural England and reported in:

- *Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment: The national survey on people and the natural environment*⁵ (MENE)
- *Visits to the Natural Environment: Monthly update*⁶ (Monthly Update) and the forthcoming replacement quarterly updates⁷

1.1.2 This report was prepared by the Authority's Assessment team, and approved by the Assessment Committee on behalf of the Board of the Statistics Authority, based on the advice of the Head of Assessment.

1.2 Decision concerning designation as National Statistics

1.2.1 The Statistics Authority judges that the statistics covered by this report are readily accessible, produced according to sound methods and managed impartially and objectively in the public interest, subject to any points for action in this report. The Statistics Authority confirms that the statistics listed in paragraph 1.1.1 can be designated as new National Statistics products, subject to Natural England implementing the Requirements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by June 2014.

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

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

1.3.1 *MENE* and the associated *Monthly Update* are the first Natural England statistical reports to be assessed to gain National Statistics status and the producer team has worked to ensure that its policies and processes comply with the *Code*.

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

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

⁵ <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/evidence/mene.aspx/>

⁶ http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/monthly-reports-year4-combined_tcm6-36094.pdf

⁷ Natural England has consulted users and plans to replace the monthly updates with quarterly updates from early 2014. Natural England has confirmed that the statistics presented will be the same, just published less frequently

- 1.3.2 Natural England provides a good range of tools and information to help users interpret and re-use the statistics. The statistical reports would benefit from an improved narrative and more information about the strengths and limitations of the statistics in relation to use.
- 1.3.3 Natural England needs to provide some assurance about how far users can rely on the future of the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) survey and publish its plans for the replacement of monthly updates with quarterly updates.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

- 1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that Natural England 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 widely with users of these statistics; document more fully the uses made of the statistics; and publish information about users' experiences (para 3.1).
Requirement 2	Pre-announce Natural England's plans to replace <i>Monthly Update</i> with quarterly updates and publish a timetable of releases for 12 months ahead (para 3.2).
Requirement 3	Confirm that future changes to methods or classifications will be published in advance of the changed statistics (para 3.4).
Requirement 4	Promote a culture within which Natural England statistical experts can comment publicly on statistical issues (para 3.8).
Requirement 5	Publish more information about: the strengths and limitations of the MENE statistics in relation to their use; the coherence of the statistics with other related published statistics; and their comparability with statistics produced by other UK administrations (para 3.10).
Requirement 6	Publish information on an annual basis about the burden on data suppliers, including the average interview duration (para 3.16).

- Requirement 7** Confirm that sufficient resources are available to allow these statistics to be produced to the standards of the *Code* (para 3.17).
- Requirement 8** Improve the commentary in the reports so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics (para 3.18).
- Requirement 9** Improve the signposting for official statistics on Natural England’s website and re-instate key documents about these statistics (para 3.19).
- Requirement 10** Ensure that all reports are accessible via the National Statistics Publication Hub and clearly label the contact details for the responsible statistician in the statistical reports (para 3.21).

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 Natural England is an executive non-departmental public body and arms length body of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). The *Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006*⁸ established Natural England with the primary statutory purpose to protect and improve England's natural environment and encourage people to enjoy and get involved in their surroundings. Natural England produces official statistics about engagement with the natural environment⁹, sites of special scientific interest¹⁰ and the Environmental Stewardship Scheme¹¹. Natural England told us that it aims, in time, to have all of its official statistics assessed against the Code and that it will apply any lessons from this first Assessment more broadly. The subject of this report is *Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment: The national survey on people and the natural environment (MENE)* and the associated *Visits to the Natural Environment: Monthly update (Monthly Update)*.
- 2.2 *MENE* is published annually, covering the period March to February, and presents monthly, quarterly and annual statistics about how people use the natural environment in England including: numbers of visits; the numbers and profiles of people that do and don't visit; the destinations visited; the reasons for the visits and the activities undertaken. Natural England defines the natural environment as the green open spaces in and around towns and cities, as well as the wider countryside and coastline. *MENE* also presents information about: participation in associated activities such as gardening; appreciation for green spaces; and pro-environmental behaviours. *Monthly Update* presents interim monthly summary statistics as the data are collected, in advance of *MENE* publishing the final results. Natural England is planning to move from monthly to quarterly updates from early 2014. The points raised by the Assessment will apply equally to the new quarterly updates.
- 2.3 Natural England funds the production of *MENE* (approximately 90 per cent) with support from Defra and the Forestry Commission and commissions a private contractor, TNS¹², to collect the data and produce the annual statistical report and supporting materials to its specification. Natural England first commissioned *MENE* in 2009, for the reference period 2009/10, and the current framework contract runs for one year, with the option to extend for two more. Natural England told us that it is already exploring options for pursuing a further framework contract or European competitive tender.
- 2.4 TNS includes a series of questions on its Face-to-Face Omnibus Survey¹³. The survey involves weekly waves of interviewing and asks respondents about visits to the natural environment made in the seven days preceding the interview. In each wave, interviews are undertaken with a sample of the resident adult population (aged 16 and over) of England, with a sample of at least 800 achieved. Basic details are recorded about each visit and then the

⁸ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/16/contents>

⁹ See footnote 5

¹⁰ <http://www.sssi.naturalengland.org.uk/special/sssi/report.cfm?category=C,CF>

¹¹ <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/farming/newsletters/default.aspx>

¹² <http://www.tnsglobal.com/>

¹³ <http://www.tnsglobal.com/uk/omnibus>

respondent is asked for more information about one randomly selected visit. The majority of the questions are included in every weekly wave but TNS asks some non-core questions monthly or quarterly – for example, questions about pro-environmental activities such as recycling.

2.5 Natural England, the Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission use the statistics to inform their work to promote public understanding, conservation and enjoyment of the natural environment, including forests, rivers and coasts. The statistics provide an evidence base to link their plans to identified needs and to evaluate the impact of their work and of broader policy relating to the natural environment. Since their inception in 2009, these statistics have been increasingly used more widely. Examples include:

- Public Health Outcomes Framework Indicator 1.16 relates to the percentage of people using outdoor places for exercise/health reasons¹⁴
- 1 of the 41 measures of National Well-being produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) relates to numbers of visits to the natural environment¹⁵
- Biodiversity 2020 indicators 13 and 14 relate to public enjoyment of the natural environment, and taking action for the natural environment¹⁶
- Natural Environment White Paper indicators relating to ease of access to the natural environment and the proportion of the population visiting¹⁷
- UK National Ecosystem Assessment¹⁸ and ONS's experimental UK woodland ecosystem asset and services accounts¹⁹
- Providing context for other statistics and research about tourism such as the information collected by Visit England²⁰ and Visit Britain²¹

2.6 The statistical reports are published in PDF, with data tables published in Excel and SPSS formats. Natural England also provides the MENE On-line Cross-tabulation Viewer²², a tool that allows users to cross-tabulate the survey data, pre-analysed by the required weights, and copy the results into other applications. This equates to a level two rating under the Five Star Scheme that forms part of the Open Standards Principles proposed in the *Open Data White Paper: Unleashing the Potential*²³ and adopted as government policy in November 2012²⁴.

2.7 Natural England estimates that the total annual cost of producing *MENE* and *Monthly Update* is approximately £440,000.

¹⁴ <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/evidence/mene.aspx#PHOF>

¹⁵ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/interactive/well-being-wheel-of-measures/index.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/england-biodiversity-indicators>

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/england-natural-environment-indicators>

¹⁸ <http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org/>

¹⁹ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/publications/measuring-the-uk-woodlands-ecosystem.pdf>

²⁰ <http://www.visitengland.org/insight-statistics/>

²¹ <http://www.visitbritain.org/insightsandstatistics/>

²² <http://naturalengland.tns-global.com/>

²³ http://data.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Open_data_White_Paper.pdf

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-standards-principles/open-standards-principles>

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 Natural England told us that it engages regularly with Defra and the Forestry Commission (its partners) at quarterly MENE Steering Group meetings, and with users from Defra's arm's length bodies via Defra's Social Research Network. Natural England told us that it does not have a strategy for engaging with the wider user community but said that it develops communication plans as the need arises – for example, utilising the statistical reports, the MENE webpage, Twitter and e-mail. Natural England launched a review of MENE during August 2013, the first stage of which was to carry out a user engagement survey. The survey was widely advertised and Natural England told us that it received over one hundred responses. Natural England expects to publish the outcomes of the review, including the survey results, in early 2014. Natural England ran a similar survey in 2011²⁵ that received around twenty responses but has not published the results, or any information about how the information was used to improve the statistics. *MENE* presents some generic information about how Natural England and its partners use the statistics, as well as providing a link to the Public Health Outcomes Framework indicator 1.16 that is based on the statistics. However, in response to this Assessment, users told us about a wide range of uses, and potential uses, of these statistics that are not apparent from the statistical report. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Natural England should take steps to engage more widely with users of these statistics; document more fully the uses made of the statistics; and publish information about users' experiences²⁶ (Requirement 1). We suggest that in meeting this requirement Natural England should refer to the types of use put forward in the Statistics Authority's Monitoring Brief, *The Use Made of Official Statistics*²⁷ when documenting use.
- 3.2 Natural England told us that it pre-announces the release of *MENE* at least four weeks in advance, and that it usually publishes a 12-month schedule for *Monthly Update* – both on its website. However, since its decision to move from monthly to quarterly updates, Natural England has effectively suspended *Monthly Update* until the new output can be developed, and has not alerted users to when the next publication will be. The quarterly data continue to be made available via the On-line Cross-tabulation Viewer but Natural England has not publicised this in any way. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Natural England should pre-announce its plans to replace *Monthly Update* with quarterly updates and publish a timetable of releases for 12 months ahead²⁸ (Requirement 2).

²⁵ http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/home_page_-_latest_news/mene2.aspx

²⁶ In relation to Principle 1, Practices 1, 2 and 5 of the *Code of Practice*

²⁷ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-reviews/monitoring-brief-6-2010---the-use-made-of-official-statistics.pdf>

²⁸ In relation to Principle 1, Practice 4; Principle 2, Practice 1; and Protocol 2, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

Principle 2: Impartiality and objectivity

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

- 3.3 Aside from the noted suspension of *Monthly Update* since April 2013, Natural England publishes these statistics in an orderly and timely manner on its website, free of charge to users.
- 3.4 Natural England told us that it consults users about changes to methods or classifications, and that it did so in relation to the move from publishing monthly to quarterly updates. However, Natural England did not announce that it had suspended *Monthly Update* and has not announced details of its replacement. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Natural England should confirm that future changes to methods or classifications will be published in advance of the changed statistics²⁹ (Requirement 3).
- 3.5 Natural England has published *Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE): compliance with the Statistics & Registration Services Act 2007*³⁰ (*Compliance Statement*) alongside the statistics. This document seeks to explain some of the ways that Natural England complies with the principles of the *Code*, including a commitment to alert users to any errors discovered in the statistical reports. Natural England re-issues the statistics with a coversheet explaining the reason for any correction and quantifying the impact for users³¹. Natural England told us that there are no scheduled revisions for these statistics and so it does not have a revisions policy. We suggest that Natural England publish a clear statement alongside the statistics to advise users that the statistics are not subject to scheduled revisions.

²⁹ In relation to Principle 2, Practice 4 of the *Code of Practice*

³⁰ http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/MENESTatisticsActCompliance_tcm6-21994.pdf

³¹ Example of a correction notice in June 2012: http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/monthly-reports-year4-combined_tcm6-36094.pdf

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.

- 3.6 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.
- 3.7 Compliance with the *Code* requires that the relevant Head of Profession for Statistics (HoP) has the sole responsibility for deciding on statistical methods and procedures, and on the content and timing of statistical reports. In the case of arm's length bodies like Natural England, the appointed Lead Official for Statistics (Lead Official) assumes this role. The Senior Adviser in Natural England's Evidence team is the Lead Official for these statistics and is responsible for the content and timing of MENE and Monthly Update, including managing the contract with TNS. As part of the standard model for engagement with the UK statistical system, Defra's HoP, who is professionally accountable to the National Statistician, provides advice, guidance and support to the Lead Official at Natural England on statistical matters, including its responsibilities under the *Code* and statistical legislation. The Lead Official told us that he has a strong working relationship with Defra's HoP.
- 3.8 Natural England told us that its Press Office clears all statements for factual accuracy with the Lead Official but that only Government Ministers and a small number of civil servants are named as spokespersons for the department. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Natural England should promote a culture within which Natural England statistical experts can comment publicly on statistical issues³² (Requirement 4).

³² In relation to Principle 3, Practice 7 of the *Code of Practice*

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 Natural England publishes a detailed technical report³³ alongside the statistics that presents details of the survey methodology, weighting, and estimates of margins of error. The report also outlines the quality assurance processes for these statistics. *MENE* includes annexes with summary information about the survey methods and quality measures including confidence intervals. Some of the information presented is of a technical nature and would benefit from more straightforward explanations. The technical report, together with a supporting Frequently Asked Questions document³⁴, provides some helpful information about the choices of methods but it does not sufficiently explain the limitations of the quota sampling approach and how it accounts for those limitations. A scoping study published by Natural England in 2007 that considered the different options for collecting these statistics provides more information about the sampling approach. However, the document is no longer available from Natural England's website.
- 3.10 As part of the response to this Assessment, users raised some questions about the appropriateness of the statistics for their particular use, for example, in terms of the classification systems used and coherence with other data sources. Natural England told us that it has just completed some analysis of the coherence of the *MENE* statistics with the GB Tourism Survey³⁵ and that it will publish the results. Users also raised questions about the comparability of the statistics with equivalents for the other UK administrations. Natural England is due to report shortly on a review of *MENE* that starts from the basis of understanding user needs (see paragraph 3.1), but the points raised illustrate that insufficient information is published about the strengths and limitations of these statistics in relation to their use. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Natural England should publish more information about: the strengths and limitations of the *MENE* statistics in relation to their use; the coherence of the statistics with other related published statistics; and their comparability with statistics produced by other UK administrations³⁶ (Requirement 5).
- 3.11 Natural England has published a standard for quality management³⁷ and told us that it also applies Defra's quality strategy for statistics³⁸. We suggest that Natural England publish a link to Defra's quality strategy, plus any other Defra statistical standards that Natural England applies, alongside the *MENE* statistics.

³³ <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/6177445019385856?category=47018>

³⁴ http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/MENE-FAQ_tcm6-26983.pdf

³⁵ <http://www.visitengland.org/insight-statistics/major-tourism-surveys/overnightvisitors/>

³⁶ In relationship to Principle 4, Practices 1, 2, 3 and 6 and Principle 8, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

³⁷ <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/category/3769710>

³⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-environment-food-rural-affairs/about/statistics>

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.

- 3.12 Natural England has assured us that it takes all necessary steps to protect the confidentiality of the data that TNS collects on its behalf, and includes a confidentiality commitment in *Compliance Statement*.
- 3.13 All Natural England employees with access to confidential MENE data have signed a Declaration of Confidentiality and undertake compulsory annual training on data handling. Natural England told us that, in line with the *Data Protection Act 1998*³⁹, TNS provides information about its data protection commitment to all respondents to its Face-to-Face Omnibus Survey.
- 3.14 Specified Natural England employees have access to anonymised postcode-level data to facilitate mapping to different geographical areas. Natural England has a signed Memorandum of Understanding with TNS that covers the provision of individual postcode data to Natural England for this purpose. The Lead Official told us that the lowest level that it would publish statistics for would be lower super output areas⁴⁰, where it is confident that there is no risk of disclosing personal information.
- 3.15 Natural England told us that it also permits TNS to share individual anonymised postcode data with named users where it is confident that the data will be used for a specific statistical purpose that could not otherwise be satisfied. In these instances, Natural England insists that a Memorandum of Understanding is signed between TNS and the third-party that specifies the exact use of the data and requires that any disclosive information is subsequently destroyed. Natural England told us that TNS retains responsibility for protecting these data.

³⁹ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/29/contents>

⁴⁰ <http://neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/HTMLDocs/nessgeography/superoutputareasexplained/output-areas-explained.htm>

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.

- 3.16 Participation in the Face-to-Face Omnibus Survey is voluntary. Natural England told us that an important part of its recent review of MENE was to ensure that all the data collected by TNS on its behalf meets a clear user need. Natural England publishes details about how respondents are selected, the interview process and the questions asked in its technical report. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Natural England should publish information on an annual basis about the burden on data suppliers, including the average interview duration⁴¹ (Requirement 6).

⁴¹ In relation to Principle 6, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

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.

3.17 *MENE* and *Monthly Update* are produced by Natural England's Evidence team, which also manages the contract with TNS. The Lead Official advised that there have been recent cuts to resources but that the team has sought to manage this through more efficient practices. The user response to this Assessment demonstrates a range of important uses for these statistics, including uses that were not originally potentially envisaged, and it is likely that user demands are set to further increase. Users raised concerns about a lack of certainty around the continued funding for *MENE*, and whether it will constitute a robust long-term data source. Natural England told us that there can never be complete certainty around funding as Natural England is dependent on the outcomes of Spending Reviews but that the review of *MENE* that has just concluded seeks to address this issue. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Natural England should confirm that sufficient resources are available to allow these statistics to be produced to the standards of the *Code*⁴² (Requirement 7). We suggest that in meeting this requirement, Natural England should publish the outcomes of the *MENE* review and advise users about what the outcomes mean for the future of the survey.

⁴² In relation to Principle 7, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

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

- 3.18 *MENE* is a well-structured report that effectively describes the latest statistics for users, supported by summary tables, charts and maps. As well as the technical report and the frequently asked questions document, Natural England publishes a range of information to aid interpretation of the statistics including a video podcast⁴³ and infographics⁴⁴. However, *MENE* would benefit from an improved narrative that seeks to explain what the statistics mean, as well as describing them. Natural England acknowledges this as an area for improvement and told us that it is investigating information sources that might provide some context for the statistics – for example, information about weather patterns from the Met Office⁴⁵. *Monthly Update* serves a different user need to *MENE*, and is brief by design. However, *Monthly Update* would benefit equally from a better narrative and the information about the statistics, including key definitions and links to metadata documents, needs to be improved. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Natural England should improve the commentary in the reports so that it aids user interpretation of the statistics⁴⁶ (Requirement 8). We suggest that in meeting this requirement, Natural England consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve the statistical reports.
- 3.19 *MENE*, *Monthly Update* and all the supporting data tables, data analysis tools and documents about methods and quality are all available from the *MENE* webpage⁴⁷ on Natural England’s website. Information presented on this page also makes it clear that these are official statistics. However, the page is found within the Evidence section of the website and is difficult to locate from the homepage; Information about the official statistics produced by Natural England is not presented together in one place. Also, we found that a number of important documents that had previously been published are no longer available from the website – for example, the 2007 scoping study mentioned in paragraph 3.9, consultation documents and user surveys. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Natural England should improve the signposting for official statistics on its website and re-instate key documents about these statistics⁴⁸ (Requirement 9).

⁴³ <http://youtu.be/GM2E2x3GETQ>

⁴⁴ http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/mene-infographic-report-2012-13_tcm6-36346.pdf

⁴⁵ <http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/>

⁴⁶ In relationship to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

⁴⁷ See footnote 5

⁴⁸ In relation to Principle 8, Practices 4 and 7 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.

3.20 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.

- 3.21 Natural England releases the statistics at 9.30am on the pre-announced date via its website. The statistics are not available from the National Statistics Publication Hub⁴⁹. The statistical reports include a range of contact details but those of the responsible statistician are not clearly labelled. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Natural England should ensure that all reports are accessible via the Publication Hub and clearly label the contact details for the responsible statistician in the statistical reports⁵⁰ (Requirement 10).
- 3.22 Natural England publishes information about how it complies with the rules and principles on pre-release access set out in legislation in *Compliance Statement*. Natural England also publishes the pre-release access list⁵¹ of those who receive limited access to *MENE* and *Monthly Update* 24 hours prior to publication.

⁴⁹ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/hub/index.html>

⁵⁰ In relation to Protocol 2 Practices 3 and 6 of the *Code of Practice*

⁵¹ See footnote 5

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.

3.23 Statistics in *MENE* and *Monthly Update* are not compiled from administrative sources.

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to Natural England's statistics about engagement with the natural environment in England, 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 | Refer to the types of use put forward in the Statistics Authority's Monitoring Brief, <i>The Use Made of Official Statistics</i> when documenting use (para 3.1). |
| Suggestion 2 | Publish a clear statement alongside the statistics to advise users that the statistics are not subject to scheduled revisions (para 3.5). |
| Suggestion 3 | Publish a link to Defra's quality strategy, plus any other Defra statistical standards that Natural England applies, alongside the MENE statistics (para 3.11). |
| Suggestion 4 | Publish the outcomes of the <i>MENE</i> review and advise users about what the outcomes mean for the future of the survey (para 3.17). |
| Suggestion 5 | Consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve the statistical reports (para 3.18). |

Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Reports

- A2.1 In November 2012, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Reports*⁵². While this is not part of the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*, the Authority regards it as advice that will promote both understanding and compliance with the *Code*. In relation to the statistical reports associated with statistics about engagement with the natural environment in England, this annex comments on compliance with the statement on standards.
- A2.2 In implementing any Requirements of this report (at paragraph 1.5) which relate to the content of statistical reports, we encourage the producer body to apply the standards as fully as possible.

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

- A2.3 *MENE* presents a short foreword that briefly explains the purpose of the statistical report, how the statistics are used and what data are available alongside the report. An executive summary repeats much of this information and then presents together the headline results from each chapter of the report in the form of bullet points. The overall story is not drawn out from the statistics.
- A2.4 *MENE* includes a detailed table of contents followed by an introduction. Again, this repeats some of the earlier information, but it provides a helpful guide to the structure of the report. The structure of each chapter is broadly the same, outlining its focus, repeating the headline results and then providing more detailed analysis supported by charts, summary tables and maps. As well as presenting suitable rounded numbers, the statistical report uses percentages and averages per head of population to convey the results.
- A2.5 Four years of data are available and *MENE* discusses the latest statistics within this context. The commentary is generally descriptive. *MENE* does not attempt to provide any explanations about what the statistics are showing – for example, Chapter 2 presents the seasonal patterns of the average number of visits but does not discuss any possible correlation with particularly bad winters or dry springs. The report does present some analysis identifying correlations in behaviours. To aid users in interpreting the statistics, Natural England presents a video podcast and some good infographics alongside the statistical report.
- A2.6 The text presented is impartial. The Assessment team found one minor example of commentary where the statisticians might be seen to be endorsing Natural England policy, talking about the statistics ‘....highlighting the importance of accessible green space’. We consider that Natural England should take care to closely review its outputs to ensure that there can be no perception of any partiality.
- A2.7 *MENE* describes the key terms and concepts when they are introduced, or they are well footnoted and referenced. For example, ‘natural environment’ is described from the start and clear signposting is provided to an annex describing the socio-economic groups. There is some discussion of correlation and statistical margins of error that would benefit from clearer explanation.

⁵² <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-reports.html>

Also, the concept of ‘statistical significance’ is overused – Natural England notes at the beginning of the report that all results are statistically significant unless otherwise stated but then uses the term repeatedly. *MENE* switches between discussing the English population and the population of England which might be understood to mean different things. The use of the terms ‘year 1’ to ‘year 4’ to reference the annual results does not seem practical in the long term.

A2.8 In contrast to *MENE*, *Monthly Update* is a brief two-page summary of the latest statistics that focuses on the volume of visits to the environment, and their profile. The statistical report presents a series of descriptive bullet points supported by charts and summary tables but it does not feature any information to help users interpret the statistics such as methods, concepts and definitions. It relies instead on providing a link to *MENE*.

Include information about the context and likely uses of the statistics

A2.9 *MENE* begins by broadly describing how Natural England uses the statistics. Links are provided to some examples of further analysis by Natural England based on the results, for example, in relation to well-being. However, there are a range of very specific uses of the statistics, which with the exception of the Public Health Outcomes Framework are not described. This limits how far Natural England can discuss the strengths and limitations of the statistics in relation to use.

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

A2.10 Natural England provides a comprehensive technical report alongside the statistics. *MENE* also includes an annex about the accuracy of the survey results, including information about the sample design effect and confidence intervals. However, some of the information presented is quite technical and would benefit from clearer explanation. Natural England could also provide more information about the possible bias introduced by using an in-house survey and quota sampling methods.

Be professionally sound

A2.11 The charts and maps are not always clear when printed in black and white. For example, the report uses cartograms to examine the average number of visits by residents of regions but the effect is lost as it is difficult to distinguish the distorted boundaries.

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

A2.12 The titles of *MENE* and *Monthly Update* explain the subject matter and frequency of the statistics but do not reference the geographical coverage. The date of the next publication is not clear and the availability of monthly updates is not mentioned in *MENE* until page nine of the report. The name of the producer body is clear in both statistical reports and contact details are provided, though it is not clear if these are the responsible statistician’s details.

MENE clearly states that these are official statistics but *Monthly Update* does not. *MENE* Acknowledgements read as TNS thanking Natural England for its input. Natural England needs to demonstrate clearer ownership of the statistics.

- A2.13 The latest *Monthly Update* is added to the end of a single pdf document each time it is published. It is therefore not immediately clear how to find the latest statistics. Natural England should publish each update separately.
- A2.14 Natural England told us that it never revises the statistics, except in the case of an error. It would be helpful to include a clear statement in the statistical reports to this effect.
- A2.15 *MENE* does not present information about comparable statistics for the other administrations of the UK, or internationally.
- A2.16 *MENE* provides links to the datasets and metadata, together with the On-line Cross-tabulation Viewer that enables users to specify their own data tables.

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

- A3.1 This assessment was conducted from October 2013 to January 2014.
- A3.2 The Assessment team – Donna Livesey – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of Natural England in October. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 20 November. The Assessment team subsequently met Natural England during December to review compliance with the *Code of Practice*, taking account of the written evidence provided and other relevant sources of evidence.

Summary of users contacted, and issues raised

- A3.3 Part of the assessment process involves our consideration of the views of users. We approach some known and potential users of the set of statistics, and we invite comments via an open note on the Authority's website. This process is not a statistical survey, but it enables us to gain some insights about the extent to which the statistics meet users' needs and the extent to which users feel that the producers of those statistics engage with them. We are aware that responses from users may not be representative of wider views, and we take account of this in the way that we prepare Assessment reports.
- A3.4 The Assessment team received seven responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Central government	2
Office for National Statistics	2
Non-departmental public body	1
National tourist board	1
Representative body	1

- A3.5 Only a small number of users responded to this user consultation, but they demonstrated a broad range of uses for the statistics – for example: as indicators for measuring National Well-being and progress against Biodiversity 2020 indicators; to inform estimates of the economic value of the natural environment in the UK National Ecosystem Assessment and the UK Environmental Accounts; to inform water management strategy; and together with other statistics and market research, to form an evidence base for decision-making around tourism.
- A3.6 Users generally reported good working relationships with Natural England, and appreciated their expertise and helpfulness. One potential user of the statistics said that they had not been aware of their existence until this Assessment, and would appreciate better engagement by Natural England. Users said they value these statistics but some users raised concerns about lack of certainty about the future of the underpinning survey, stressing the need for robust consistent time series. One user suggested that Natural England considers whether a less frequent survey might serve user needs. Users appreciated the information provided about the limitations of the statistics, including measures such as confidence intervals. Users also welcomed the infographics and video podcasts that Natural England produces, though one user said that these could be better

publicised. Other potential areas for improvement raised by users include: the need for UK comparability; coherence with other statistics about tourism and the environment; more detailed analysis by ethnicity and disability; more in-depth commentary that explains, rather than simply describes, the statistics; better accessibility to the statistics via Natural England's website. One user said the website should have a clearly signposted official statistics page.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

