

Assessment of compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics

Statistics on Search and Rescue Callouts

(produced by the Ministry of Defence)

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About the UK Statistics Authority

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

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

The Statistics Authority has two main functions:

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

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ASSESSMENT AND DESIGNATION

The *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007* gives the UK Statistics Authority a statutory power to assess sets of statistics against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*.

Assessment will determine whether it is appropriate for the statistics to be designated as National Statistics.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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1 Summary of findings

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 This is one of a series of reports¹ prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*². The Act requires all statistics currently designated as National Statistics to be assessed against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*³. The report covers the sets of National Statistics reported in the following publications, produced by the Ministry of Defence (MOD):

- *Military Search and Rescue Statistics*⁴ (MSAR Quarterly Report); and
- *Military Search and Rescue Statistics*⁵ (MSAR Annual Report).

1.1.2 The Act requires all statistics currently designated as National Statistics to be assessed against the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics*. The Act also allows departments to request an assessment of other official statistics in order for them to gain National Statistics status. In response to such a request, this report covers the sets of official statistics reported in the following publications, produced by the MOD:

- *Search and Rescue Monthly Report*⁶ (SAR Monthly Report);
- *Search and Rescue Quarterly Report*⁷ (SAR Quarterly Report); and
- *Search and Rescue Annual Report*⁸ (SAR Annual Report).

1.1.3 This report is shorter than normal. In particular, section 3 adopts an ‘exception reporting’ approach – it includes text only to support the Requirements made to strengthen compliance with the *Code* and Suggestions made to improve confidence in the production, management and dissemination of these statistics. This abbreviated style of report reflects the Head of Assessment’s consideration of aspects of risk and materiality⁹. The Assessment team nonetheless assessed compliance with all parts of the *Code of Practice* and has commented on all those in respect of which some remedial action is recommended.

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

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

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

⁴ <http://www.dasa.mod.uk/applications/newWeb/www/index.php?page=48&pubType=1&thiscontent=410&PublishTime=09:30:00&date=2011-07-28&disText=Q2%202011&from=listing&topDate=2011-07-28>

⁵ <http://www.dasa.mod.uk/applications/newWeb/www/index.php?page=48&pubType=1&thiscontent=400&PublishTime=09:30:00&date=2011-02-03&disText=2010&from=listing&topDate=2011-02-03>

⁶ <http://www.dasa.mod.uk/applications/newWeb/www/index.php?page=48&thiscontent=1540&pubType=0&date=2011-07-29&PublishTime=09:30:00>

⁷ <http://www.dasa.mod.uk/applications/newWeb/www/index.php?page=48&pubType=0&thiscontent=1520&PublishTime=09:30:00&date=2011-07-29&disText=Q2%202011%20-%20Apr%20to%20Jun&from=listing&topDate=2011-07-29>

⁸ <http://www.dasa.mod.uk/applications/newWeb/www/index.php?page=48&pubType=0&thiscontent=1500&PublishTime=09:30:00&date=2011-02-07&disText=2010&from=listing&topDate=2011-02-07>

⁹ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment/guidance-about-assessment/criteria-for-deciding-upon-the-format-of-an-assessment-report.pdf>

1.1.4 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 at paragraph 1.1.1 and 1.1.2 can be designated as National Statistics, subject to the MOD implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 and reporting them to the Authority by January 2012.

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

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

1.3.1 The MOD has regular contact with the main users within the MOD and requests feedback from all users via its publications, website and at annual stakeholder meetings. However, it could do more to identify other potential users and uses of its search and rescue statistics from outside the MOD. It has not published information about users' experiences of the search and rescue statistics.

1.3.2 The MOD publishes information about the quality of the statistics, but this is lacking detail on accuracy and relevance.

1.3.3 The statistics are presented clearly in the releases using tables, graphs and maps. However, the MOD does not include any commentary with the *SAR Monthly Report* and *SAR Quarterly Report* and the commentary in the other releases could be improved.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that MOD 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 Investigate further the needs of users outside the MOD and publish information about users' experiences of the statistics (para 3.1).

Requirement 2 Publish (or link to) details of the methods adopted to produce the statistics included in all these releases (para 3.2).

- Requirement 3** Improve the published information about the quality of these statistics (para 3.3).
- Requirement 4** Review, with a view to rationalising, the suite of statistical releases to ensure it best meets user needs (para 3.4).
- Requirement 5** Ensure that all releases include commentary and contextual information which aids user interpretation of the statistics (para 3.5).
- Requirement 6** Make clear the responsible statistician in the releases (para 3.8).

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 The MOD Search and Rescue (SAR) service exists primarily to recover aircrew from crashed military aircraft. Much of this activity happens overseas, wherever the UK military is deployed. In order to ensure its SAR crews are trained and ready for military operations, the service also assists civilians in distress, both on land and at sea. In practice this represents the vast majority of its work. The SAR service consists of Royal Air Force¹⁰ (RAF) and Royal Navy¹¹ SAR Sea King helicopters operating from eight locations around the UK and four RAF Mountain Rescue Teams. Fixed wing aircraft are occasionally used to provide assistance during incidents. Two RAF SAR helicopter units operate in Cyprus and the Falkland Islands.
- 2.2 The MOD has published statistics on its SAR civilian activities since 1992. The MOD receives the data from the Air Rescue Co-ordination Centre (ARCC)¹² at RAF Kinloss, which coordinates the military's search and rescue activities. The *MSAR* reports provide counts of the number of SAR incidents, callouts and persons moved. *MSAR Annual Report* also provides breakdowns by type of aircraft, type of assistance and region. The *SAR* reports include the same information as the *MSAR* reports, but in greater detail, including the number of flying hours. *SAR Quarterly Report* and *SAR Annual Report* include maps showing the locations of incidents.
- 2.3 SAR services are also provided by other organisations, for example Her Majesty's Coastguard (part of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency¹³ (MCA)) and independent mountain rescue teams operating as charitable organisations. The statistics covered by this assessment focus on the military's SAR service, but *SAR Quarterly Report* and *SAR Annual Report* include data on Coastguard SAR helicopter callouts, which is obtained from the MCA.
- 2.4 The statistics are used by the MOD's SAR bases (SAR-HQ at RAF Valley and ARCC at RAF Kinloss) to inform SAR training policies; by the RAF and Royal Navy for invoicing the Civil Aviation Authority¹⁴ and the NHS for civilian rescues; and by the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI)¹⁵ for records of SAR incidents at inland waterways.
- 2.5 The statistics are produced by the Defence Analytical Services and Advice¹⁶ (DASA) directorate within the MOD (previously the Defence Analytical Services Agency). In 2007, an internal DASA review investigated the requirement for, and importance of, continued SAR statistics. The review recommended that DASA stop producing the statistics. However, SAR HQ attaches sufficient importance to the statistics that it agreed to fund their ongoing production. As a result of this, a Service Level Agreement was set up between SAR HQ and DASA. DASA produces all the regular publications, as well as answer ad hoc

¹⁰ <http://www.raf.mod.uk/rafsearchandrescue/>

¹¹ <http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/Operations/Enduring-Operations/UK/Search-and-Rescue>

¹² <http://www.raf.mod.uk/rafkinloss/aboutus/arcc.cfm>

¹³ <http://www.dft.gov.uk/mca/>

¹⁴ <http://www.caa.co.uk/>

¹⁵ <http://www.rnli.org.uk/>

¹⁶ <http://www.dasa.mod.uk/>

queries, Freedom of Information queries and Parliamentary Questions. The statistics cost approximately £45,000 per year to produce.

3 Assessment findings

- 3.1 The MOD requests feedback from users in each release. It has a published user engagement strategy for the organisation and it has regular communication with the key internal users of the SAR statistics, including the SAR bases which pay for the production of the statistics. DASA holds an annual consultation meeting with users within the MOD and a separate annual meeting for external users. The annual consultation groups invite feedback and include discussions about forthcoming changes and the MOD publishes minutes of the meetings. While we recognise this as good practice, the MOD told us that SAR statistics have not recently been discussed in these meetings because there were no attendees who wished to discuss them. Although the MOD understands the needs of the narrow range of regular users of its SAR statistics, it has not taken proactive steps to identify other users (from outside the MOD) and has published no information about the user experience of these statistics. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the MOD should investigate further the needs of users outside the MOD and publish information about users' experiences of the statistics¹⁷ (Requirement 1).
- 3.2 The MOD provides users with some information about data sources within the *MSAR* reports. It has also published a *Background Quality Report*¹⁸ that provides an overview of the production process. However, this could include additional information to explain how data are collated, for example to present the data by region and type of callout. Also, there is no information about how the data from the MCA are collected and collated. The *SAR* reports do not contain any information on methods and do not link to the *Background Quality Report*. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the MOD should publish (or link to) details of the methods adopted to produce the statistics included in all these releases¹⁹ (Requirement 2). The MOD may consider creating one document detailing methods to which it links from all the releases.
- 3.3 The *Background Quality Report* includes information about the quality of the statistics. It also refers to how the statistics are used, who the users are and how the MOD consults with users, but it does not comment on the extent to which the statistics meet users' needs. In addition, the section on accuracy is not explicit about the sources of non-sampling error and the extent to which these impact on the accuracy and reliability of the data. The report also does not provide information about the relevance and accuracy of the statistics on MCA search and rescue activities – only the statistics relating to the MOD's activities. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the MOD should improve the published information about the quality of these statistics²⁰ (Requirement 3).
- 3.4 The MOD currently publishes both National Statistics and Official Statistics on its SAR activities, on an annual and quarterly basis. There is significant overlap in the releases but the *SAR* reports provide additional breakdowns and

¹⁷ In relation to Principle 1, Practices 1, 2 & 5 of the *Code of Practice*

¹⁸ <http://www.dasa.mod.uk/applications/newWeb/www/index.php?page=48&pubType=3&thiscontent=2100&PublishTime=09:30:00&date=2011-06-16&disText=Single%20Report&from=listing&topDate=2011-06-16>

¹⁹ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

²⁰ In relation to Principle 4, Practice 2 and Principle 8, Practice 1 of the *Code of Practice*

graphical representations of the statistics. The releases all have similar titles. This is likely to cause confusion for users. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the MOD should review, with a view to rationalising, the suite of statistical releases to ensure it best meets user needs²¹ (Requirement 4). We suggest that the MOD reviews the titles of the releases so that they are clearly distinguishable from one another.

- 3.5 The *MSAR* reports and the *SAR Annual Report* include key points but little other commentary to help users interpret the statistics. The other *SAR* reports do not include any commentary. None of the releases includes a section to inform users about the content of the release. Some users who contacted us regarding this assessment expressed a need for information about SAR activities by organisations other than the MOD. This is important contextual information. For example, an estimate of the total number of SAR operations, and information about (or links to) non-MOD SAR operations would place the military operations into the wider context. The *SAR Annual Report* already includes information about coastguard SAR operations. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the MOD should ensure that all releases include commentary and contextual information which aids user interpretation of the statistics²² (Requirement 5). We suggest that in meeting this requirement the MOD should consider the points detailed in annex 2.
- 3.6 The individual record data do not include confidential information but the MOD does not currently make the data publicly available at present. We suggest that the MOD considers whether record level data could be made be publicly available.
- 3.7 There is no pre-release access to the SAR releases.
- 3.8 The *SAR* reports include more than one contact name so that it is not clear who is the responsible statistician. As part of the designation as National Statistics, the MOD should make clear the responsible statistician in the releases²³ (Requirement 6).

²¹ In relation to Principle 1, Practice 2, Principle 7, Practice 5 and Principle 8, Practice 4 of the *Code of Practice*

²² In relation to Principle 8, Practice 2 of the *Code of Practice*

²³ In relation to Protocol 2, Practice 6 of the *Code of Practice*

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

A1.1 This annex includes some suggestions for improvement to the Search and Rescue Statistics, in the interest of the public good. These are not formally required for designation, but the Assessment team considers that their implementation will improve public confidence in the production, management and dissemination of official statistics.

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| Suggestion 1 | Review the titles of the releases so that they are clearly distinguishable from one another (para 3.4). |
| Suggestion 2 | Consider the points detailed in annex 2, in seeking to improve the statistical releases (para 3.5). |
| Suggestion 3 | Consider whether record level data could be made publicly available (para 3.6). |

Annex 2: Compliance with Standards for Statistical Releases

- A2.1 In October 2010, the Statistics Authority issued a statement on *Standards for Statistical Releases*²⁴. 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 Search and Rescue 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 The *SAR* reports are all titled 'Search and Rescue' along with the period to which they relate. The *MSAR* reports are titled 'Military Search and Rescue Statistics' and the period to which they relate is stated. It would be useful to reflect the period in the title so that when referring to the releases generally, it is clear which one is being referred to. The titles for the *MSAR* and *SAR* reports which cover the same period (quarterly and annual) have very similar titles which could cause confusion.
- A2.4 The *MSAR* reports include a statement which says that there is a weekly download of the data but not the frequency with which the data are compiled or updated. None of this information is included in the *SAR* reports.
- A2.5 Both *MSAR* reports have the National Statistics logo. The *MSAR Annual Report* is referred to as a 'Statistical Notice' but the *MSAR Quarterly Report* does not have this heading. The *SAR* reports also do not have such a heading.
- A2.6 All releases include the name of the producer body. The name and contact details of the responsible statistician are included in the *MSAR* reports. The *SAR* reports include contact details for all team members but it is not clear who is the responsible statistician.
- A2.7 The *MSAR* reports include a brief account of what is included in the release but the *SAR* reports do not.

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

- A2.8 The *MSAR* reports and the *SAR* reports include a summary of the key points at the beginning of the release but little other commentary. The other *SAR* reports do not include any commentary.
- A2.9 Straightforward language is used and there are definitions of specific *SAR* terms included in all releases.

²⁴ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/standards-for-statistical-releases.html>

A2.10 The MOD uses graphs, tables and maps in the releases to illustrate comparisons, for example, over time, by station, by callout type and by type of assistance. The releases do not include comparisons with EU/international data. The relevance section of the *Background Quality Report* includes information about why the statistics are important and to whom.

Use language that is impartial, objective and professionally sound

A2.12 The descriptions that exist about trends and changes in the statistics are professionally sound. Sampling error is not relevant for these statistics. The *Background Quality Report* refers to sources of non-sampling error but it is not sufficiently explicit and comprehensive to enable a clearer understanding about quality.

Include information about the context and likely uses

A2.13 The *Background Quality Report*, *SAR Annual Report* and the *MSAR Reports* all include factual information about the operational context in which the statistics have been collected. The *Background Quality Report* also includes information about how the statistics are used. The *Background Quality Report* has a section on accuracy (see comment at A2.12 about the information on non-sampling error) but does not comment on the extent to which sources of non-sampling error impact on the reliability of the statistics.

Include, or link to, appropriate metadata

A2.14 The *Background Quality Report* includes information about how the statistics are produced and the source of the data. The MOD does not publish information about how the methods and definitions used relate to international concepts and classifications.

A2.16 The data are not normally subject to later revision.

Annex 3: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A3.1 This assessment was conducted from June to September 2011.

A3.2 The Assessment team – Emma Bowditch and Jacob Wilcock – agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of MOD in June. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 30 June. The Assessment team subsequently met MOD in July 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 9 responses from the user consultation. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Internal MOD	5
Rescue charities	2
Regulatory bodies	1
Private companies	1

A3.5 Respondents use the statistics to develop an understanding of the requirements for future SAR services, producing incident risk profiles. The MOD uses the statistics for invoicing for civil aviation call-outs. The statistics enable organisations providing rescue services to understand their contribution in the context of a national effort. The statistics are also the subject of Parliamentary Questions and Freedom of Information requests.

A3.6 User requests included more details on non-MOD SAR activities and more details on the cause of the accidents detailed in the statistics. Some users commented that accessibility of the statistics could be improved. However, users reported being satisfied with the engagement with the statistics team within the MOD and that the team had been helpful in responding to requests for information.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

