

Assessment of Agriculture in the UK and selected crop and livestock statistics

*produced by the Department for
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs*

Assessment Report 22

December 2009

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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

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

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

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

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

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

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further information come to light subsequently which changes the Authority's analysis, the Assessment report may be withdrawn and revised as necessary.

Once designated as National Statistics, it is a statutory requirement on the producer organisation to ensure that the set of statistics continues to be produced, managed and disseminated in compliance with the Code of Practice.

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1 Summary of findings

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 This is one of a series of reports prepared under the provisions of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*¹. The report covers *Agriculture in the UK*² (AUK), *Agricultural Statistics in your Pocket*³, and 15 sets of crop and livestock commodity statistics (listed in 2.5), produced by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). AUK fulfils the requirement under the *Agriculture Act 1993* that Ministers publish an annual report on such matters relating to price support for agricultural produce. Whilst price support is now less relevant, AUK continues to bring together statistics relating to agriculture and the environment in one report. *Agricultural Statistics in your Pocket* is a condensed summary of the statistics presented in AUK. The crop and livestock commodity statistics are published as regular 'Statistical Notices' and are used by the UK government and the EU to monitor the impact of agricultural policy, as well as providing the statistics for some chapters of AUK.

1.1.2 AUK and *Agricultural Statistics in your Pocket* 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 confirms that the statistics published in AUK, *Agricultural Statistics in your Pocket*, and the crop and livestock commodity statistics listed in 2.5 are designated as National Statistics, subject to Defra implementing the enhancements listed in section 1.5 below and reporting them to the Authority by March 2010.

1.3 Summary of strengths and weaknesses

1.3.1 The main user needs are met and Defra engages well with the primary users of the statistics. There is a need for Defra to identify and formally recognise other users of these outputs.

¹ http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2007/pdf/ukpga_20070018_en.pdf

² <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/publications/auk/default.asp>

³ <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/publications/auk/pocketstats/default.asp>

- 1.3.2 The outputs are disseminated widely in an impartial manner, and are, in the main, presented clearly. Improvements to the commentary and explanatory notes that accompany some of the outputs would improve their accessibility to a wider audience.
- 1.3.3 The production processes undertaken and the quality assurance processes used by the production teams are well documented and understood. However, documentation of survey methods, metadata and user needs is limited with no metadata published for several of the commodity outputs.
- 1.3.4 Outputs are currently difficult to find on Defra's website. This issue is acknowledged by Defra and will be addressed in their current web redesign project.

1.4 Detailed recommendations

- 1.4.1 The Assessment team identified some areas where it felt that Defra 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 below. 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	Document the needs of users, and the types of decisions these statistics inform (para 3.3)
Requirement 2	Provide a statement explaining the nature and extent of revisions at the same time that they are released (para 3.5)
Requirement 3	Publish information on the methods adopted in the collection and production of these statistics, including citation of data sources (para 3.9)
Requirement 4	Ensure all respondents are informed of how confidentiality will be protected (para 3.11)
Requirement 5	Prepare and disseminate appropriate commentary for all statistics (3.18)
Requirement 6	Provide information on the quality and reliability of all the statistics in relation to the range of potential uses (para 3.19)
Requirement 7	Include the name and contact details of the responsible statistician in all statistical releases (3.25)

2 Subject of the assessment

- 2.1 AUK has been published annually since 1988 and fulfils the requirement under the *Agriculture Act 1993* that Ministers publish an annual report that covers matters relating to price support for agricultural produce they consider relevant. AUK, and the smaller summary version *Agricultural Statistics in your Pocket*, are compendium publications and are produced jointly by: Defra, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (Northern Ireland), Department for Rural Affairs and Heritage (Wales); and the Rural and Environment Research and Analysis Directorate (Scotland).
- 2.2 The data collected for the crop and livestock commodity statistics listed at 2.5 are collected primarily to meet EU requirements. The methods used have changed over the years to reflect changing policy requirements (particularly at the EU level) and industry practices. Surveys vary in frequency (from monthly to annual) and number of respondents (from six to over 100). They are targeted at primary food processors (for example flour mills, animal feed producers, slaughterhouses and dairies) and ask for information on their use of UK produced commodities. Survey results are published regularly on Defra's website and are used in other summary outputs such as AUK and balance sheets.
- 2.3 The data are used for a range of purposes. They are provided to Eurostat and the European Commission, and contribute to statistics that are used to make decisions on EU agricultural policy. Elements also contribute to the Economic Accounts for Agriculture and tables in AUK output by Defra. Data are also provided to the Office for National Statistics to feed into: the Agricultural Price Index (API), Gross Value Added (GVA) and Index of Production (IOP). Cereal survey data are used to help inform and construct forecast balance sheets. The Government draw on the information within AUK when considering policy issues, including proposals by the European Commission in respect of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the provision of agricultural support. Trade associations and industry bodies use the statistics in industry monitoring and to inform their dialogue with government.
- 2.4 The estimated costs for producing these outputs in 2009-10 is £217,000.
- 2.5 In addition to the compendium publications AUK and *Agricultural Statistics in your Pocket*, the following sets of statistics were assessed.

Crop commodity statistics:

UK Wheat Milled and Flour Production⁴ (Monthly)

Cereals Usage by Brewers, Distillers and Maltsters in the UK⁵ (Monthly)

GB Animal Feed⁶ (Monthly)

Cereals Usage by Oatmeal Millers in the UK⁷ (Annual)

⁴ <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/flourns.htm>

⁵ <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/brewersns.htm>

⁶ <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/feedstuffsns.htm>

⁷ <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/oatsns.htm>

Cereal stocks at Ports, Co-ops and Merchants⁸ (Twice per year)

Livestock commodity statistics:

United Kingdom Milk Prices and Composition of Milk⁹ (Monthly)

Utilisation of Milk by Dairies in England and Wales¹⁰ (Monthly)

UK production of processed milk¹¹ (Quarterly)

Milk statistics¹² (Quarterly)

United Kingdom Slaughter Statistics¹³ (Monthly)

GB Production of Bacon and Ham¹⁴ (Quarterly)

UK Supplies and Total for Domestic Usage of all Carcass Meat, Bacon, Ham and Poultry Meat¹⁵ (Quarterly)

United Kingdom Slaughter Statistics - Clean Pigs¹⁶ (Quarterly)

Egg Statistics¹⁷ (Quarterly)

Poultry and Poultry Meat Statistics¹⁸ (Monthly)

⁸ <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/portsns.htm>

⁹ <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/milkpricns.htm>

¹⁰ <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/milkutns.htm>

¹¹ <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/promilkns.htm>

¹² <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/milkns.htm>

¹³ <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/slaughterns.htm>

¹⁴ <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/baconns.htm>

¹⁵ <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/datasets/qtrmeat.xls>

¹⁶ <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/datasets/pig.xls>

¹⁷ <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/eggns.htm>

¹⁸ <https://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/poultryns.htm>

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 Users are engaged in several ways. For AUK, Defra statisticians invite all users that they are aware of to an annual seminar to discuss the content and distribution of the publication. A launch event was held in 2009 for *Agricultural Statistics in your Pocket*. For the commodity statistics, quarterly meetings are held for crop statistics and six monthly meetings for livestock surveys. These commodity review meetings are attended by internal Defra users and representatives of external organisations such as trade bodies and farmers' unions. Twice yearly methodology meetings are also held with the devolved administrations.
- 3.2 Feedback from the AUK seminar and discussion with Defra statisticians suggests that there is a diverse user community for these statistics and while there is informal recognition of this, the Assessment team suggests that it should be formally recognised and these users actively engaged with. We suggest this could be complemented by a note in selected releases inviting feedback from users.
- 3.3 Defra told us that some of the statistics produced primarily for European requirements have a narrow audience in the UK. While they have an understanding of what the European requirements are, there is no documentation of the use made of them nor the types of decisions they inform. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Defra should document the needs of users, and the types of decisions these statistics inform¹⁹ (Requirement 1). In addition, we suggest Defra publish information on the uses of these statistics either in or alongside each release. The Chair of the Statistics Authority intends to write to the appropriate European institution(s) regarding the need for better information on the uses made of agriculture statistics at the European level.

¹⁹ In relation to Principle 1 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.

- 3.4 Statistics are published according to a published release timetable. They are released on Defra's website without charge to the user. AUK was previously published in hardcopy, but to save costs, Defra decided to publish on the web only. In response to user requests Defra plans to reintroduce a limited print run, but will be charging for hard copies.
- 3.5 Defra has a published revisions policy. However, when data previously marked 'provisional' are revised, this is not noted. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Defra should provide a statement explaining the nature and extent of revisions at the same time that the revised data are released²⁰ (Requirement 2).

²⁰ In relation to Principle 2 Practice 6 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.

- 3.6 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.

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.

- 3.7 A mixture of voluntary and statutory surveys is used to collect the data published in the crop and livestock commodity statistical notices. All surveys use paper questionnaires to collect data, although Defra accepts data in the format most convenient to the respondent. When the population of interest is small, censuses are used; where it is larger, sample surveys are conducted. High response rates are obtained in all of these surveys. AUK draws on these commodity data as well as additional data sources.
- 3.8 The evidence supplied by Defra suggests that the production processes undertaken and the quality assurance processes used are well documented and understood by the teams who undertake the data collection.
- 3.9 In AUK and *Agricultural Statistics in your Pocket*, data sources are only cited if data are supplied by organisations outside Defra. Information on data sources is an important aspect of methods, particularly for a compendium which draws from a range of sources. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Defra should publish information on the methods adopted in the collection and production of these statistics, including citation of data sources²¹ (Requirement 3).

²¹ In relation to Principle 4 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

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.

- 3.10 Defra has assured us that it takes all necessary steps to protect the confidentiality of the data it collects. A data confidentiality policy is published and all staff receive appropriate training. Defra is in the process of approving confidentiality statements which it plans to ask all relevant staff to sign. The evidence provided by Defra suggests that appropriate disclosure control methods are used and there have been no cases of a breach of confidentiality. Where samples are very small, Defra has sometimes asked for the consent of respondents to publish data that may be disclosive.
- 3.11 A statement on data confidentiality is included on the majority of questionnaires used to collect the crop and livestock commodity data. However, some of the questionnaires Defra sent us did not appear to have this statement. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Defra should ensure all respondents are informed of how confidentiality will be protected²² (Requirement 4). We suggest this is achieved by including a confidentiality statement on all data collection instruments.
- 3.12 Defra maintains an up to date risk register covering both data processing and storage.

²² In relation to Principle 5 Practice 3 of the Code of Practice

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.

- 3.13 The crop and livestock commodity surveys collect very detailed information. Defra told us that this data is necessary to fulfil statutory requirements and 'gentlemen's agreements' from the European Commission. Many of these data are also used by various trade associations and producer groups within the UK.
- 3.14 Defra has a strict process for agreeing new data collections, and it carries out a regular review of existing collections. Each year, survey managers are asked to confirm the need to continue each survey. For the commodity surveys, this extends to checking whether the statutory requirements are still in place.
- 3.15 Estimated costs are published annually. These are calculated on the assumption that each questionnaire takes approximately 30 minutes to complete, and this is multiplied by the number of respondents. It is not clear how accurate these estimates are. We suggest Defra review the way compliance costs are calculated.

Principle 7: Resources

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

- 3.16 Appropriate project management processes are used to manage resources and produce the outputs under review, and the production of the outputs being assessed appears to be sufficiently resourced at the current time.
- 3.17 Staff are recruited using appropriate processes using a mixture of Government Statistical Service and Defra competency frameworks. While no formal development policy is in place at present, Defra is supportive of learning and development activities for both professional and generalist staff. Defra is currently developing a general development policy for analytical staff.

Principle 8: Frankness and accessibility

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

- 3.18 The commentary included in AUK is generally of a good standard. However, some tables do not have any accompanying commentary, even when there appears to have been significant movements in the figures. *Agricultural Statistics in Your Pocket* is a good example of Defra presenting statistics in formats that are accessible to a range of different audiences. Commentary across the range of crop and livestock commodity statistics is of variable quality; some releases, such as *Milk Prices and Composition of Milk*, have adequate commentary, others have little or no commentary. Defra told us that some of these statistics are for a narrow, expert audience, who do not require monthly commentary. The Assessment team recognises that some of these statistics are of a specialist nature, but considers that a minimum level of commentary, drawing attention to the main trends, would improve accessibility for the non-expert user. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Defra should prepare and disseminate commentary for all statistics²³ (Requirement 5). We suggest that for the smaller monthly releases, commentary could be prepared in a standard format.
- 3.19 Defra acknowledges that the information it provides on quality and reliability is insufficient. Some releases contain no quality information; others have only basic information such as response rates. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Defra should provide information on the quality and reliability of all the statistics in relation to the range of potential uses²⁴ (Requirement 6).
- 3.20 Some outputs include graphs which aid in the interpretation of the statistics. We suggest Defra review all graphs and the use of 'statistical'²⁵ and calendar months in these outputs, with a view to increasing data clarity.
- 3.21 All the outputs in this assessment are published on both the Defra website and the Publication Hub in line with the publicised timetable. However, specific statistical notices are not easy to find on the Defra website, a fact that has been noted by data users. In addition, the National Statistics logo is displayed on pages of the statistical website that do not contain National Statistics. Defra told us that a project is currently underway to improve the website. We suggest Defra ensure that users' views on accessibility feed into the overall website development work.

²³ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 2 of the Code of Practice

²⁴ In relation to Principle 8 Practice 1 of the Code of Practice

²⁵ Statistical months contain whole weeks and generally form a pattern of 4:4:5 weeks in a quarter.

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.

3.22 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.

- 3.23 AUK, its pocket edition and the commodity statistical releases included in this assessment are all available on the web. *Agricultural Statistics in your Pocket* is available in hard copy and, in response to user requests, the next edition of AUK will be available in hard copy on a cost recovery basis.
- 3.24 All the outputs are published on the National Statistics Publication Hub according to the published timetable.
- 3.25 The contact details of the responsible statistician are included for the separate chapters within AUK and its pocket edition. However, one of the commodity statistical releases does not contain this information. As part of the designation as National Statistics, Defra should include the name and contact details of the responsible statistician in all statistical releases²⁶ (Requirement 7).
- 3.26 None of the outputs included in this assessment is subject to pre-release access.

²⁶ In relation to Protocol 2 Practice 6

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.

- 3.27 Defra has published an interim 'Statement of Administrative Sources'. This will be reviewed and finalised in March 2010.
- 3.28 Administrative data from the Cattle Tracing Scheme and the Rural Payment Scheme are used by Defra to replace some direct data collection. Defra is investigating the possibility of using additional administrative data.
- 3.29 A 2004 National Statistics Quality Review²⁷ recommended that Defra make more use of the Interdepartmental Business Register (IDBR) in cooperation with the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Defra has not pursued this and continues to use and maintain its own register of farmers and agricultural processors. We suggest that Defra re-evaluates the possibility of utilising the IDBR and that the results of the review are published.

²⁷ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/methodology-and-quality/quality/nat-stats-qual-revs/qual-revs-by-theme/agri-fish-forest/national-statistics-quality-review-series-report-no--34.doc>

Annex 1: Suggestions for improvement

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

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| Suggestion 1 | Take steps to enhance user engagement, and make those steps known (para 3.2) |
| Suggestion 2 | Include a note in selected releases inviting feedback from users (para 3.2) |
| Suggestion 3 | Publish information on the uses of the statistics either in or alongside each release (para 3.3) |
| Suggestion 4 | Include a confidentiality statement on all data collection instruments (para 3.11) |
| Suggestion 5 | Review the way compliance costs are calculated (para 3.15) |
| Suggestion 6 | Consider preparing commentary in a standard format for monthly releases (para 3.18) |
| Suggestion 7 | Review all graphs and the use of 'statistical' and calendar months (para 3.20) |
| Suggestion 8 | Include users' views in the redevelopment of the website (para 3.21) |
| Suggestion 9 | Re-evaluate the possibility of making more use of the IDBR (para 3.29) |

Annex 2: Summary of assessment process and users' views

A2.1 This assessment was conducted from August to October 2009.

A2.2 The Assessment team agreed the scope of and timetable for this assessment with representatives of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) at an initial meeting in August 2009. The Written Evidence for Assessment was provided on 28 August 2009. The Assessment team subsequently met with Defra during October 2009 to review compliance with the Code of Practice, taking account of the written evidence provided and other relevant sources of evidence

Summary of users contacted, and issues raised

A2.3 The Assessment team received 22 responses from users and suppliers during the consultation period. The respondents were grouped as follows:

Trade associations / unions	11
Defra	4
Devolved administrations	2
Eurostat	1
Data suppliers	4

A2.4 Data users were largely positive about the level and type of interaction they had with Defra. For the majority of outputs both the frequency and timeliness is satisfactory. Inevitably there is a desire from some users for more data, more quickly and more frequently. Data are used for monitoring various aspects of the industry and policy development.

A2.5 Feedback from suppliers was slightly less positive as they are asked to provide some data they would not normally collate. However, the regular methodological meetings Defra holds with suppliers are seen as positive.

Key documents/links provided

Written Evidence for Assessment document

List of assessment reports published to date²⁸

1. Statistics from the National Drug Treatment Monitoring System
National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse
2. Recorded Crime in Scotland
Scottish Government
3. Statistics on Enrolments at Schools and in Funded Pre-School Education in Northern Ireland
Department of Education, Northern Ireland
4. Road Casualty Statistics
Department for Transport
5. UK Energy Sector Indicators
Department of Energy and Climate Change
6. Statistics on Road Freight
Department for Transport
7. Prison Population Projections
Ministry of Justice
8. Migration Statistics
Office for National Statistics
9. Statistics on International Development and the ODA:GNI Ratio
Department for International Development
10. The Scottish Health Survey
Scottish Government
11. Scottish House Condition Survey
Scottish Government
12. Scottish Crime and Justice Survey
Scottish Government
13. Statistics on Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England
Department for Children, Schools and Families
14. Statistics on Children Looked After by Local Authorities in Scotland
Scottish Government
15. Statistics on Children Looked After by Local Authorities in Wales
Welsh Assembly Government
16. Statistics on Children Looked After by Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland
Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Northern Ireland
17. Wealth in Great Britain
Office for National Statistics
18. Statistics on the National Child Measurement Programme
NHS Information Centre
19. Average Weekly Earnings
Office for National Statistics
20. Energy Statistics
Department of Energy and Climate Change

²⁸ Published reports are available at: <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/assessment-reports/index.html>

