
Mark Pont, Assessment Programme Lead

Sean Whellams
Head of Profession for Statistics
HMRC
(by email)

7 December 2017

Dear Sean

STATISTICS ON REGIONAL TRADE IN THE UK

We are grateful to you and the Regional Trade Statistics (RTS) team for the positive approach to our short review of these statistics. We reviewed the statistics against the three pillars – trustworthiness, quality and value – that are fundamental to supporting public confidence in statistics and form the basis of National Statistics status. This letter confirms our findings.

Overall we found that HMRC presents the RTS with a clear description of the statistical patterns and provides easy access to the statistics and data. It is also helpful in presenting clear signposting to other related statistics, publication schedules, and to the individual country infographics. Given the importance of these statistics in relation to Brexit, it will be important to maximise the public value of them by offering helpful insights to users. The narrative is fairly clear that it concerns the trade in goods of UK regions with overseas markets. The title – Regional Trade Statistics – is less clear that it relates to exports and imports, rather than intra-regional UK Trade. For clarity, we suggest you review the way that the statistics are titled to make their coverage clearer.

We consider your approach to user engagement to be appropriate for the statistics, providing the team with a good understanding of the uses made of the statistics and users' needs. The user story is a helpful way of describing how the data are used and the nature of your engagement approach. It is a good example for other producers to consider following. Your user consultation in 2015 highlights some useful feedback about the statistics, and we note that the team has conducted some user workshops more recently. It may help to further enhance your conversation with users by publishing information about what you have done as a result of the consultation or from feedback received in the workshops the team has recently held.

It would also be helpful for users if you outline the ways in which you are continuing to develop the statistics. In this important field, it is essential that you update users on your development plans and make clear how you will involve them in the important areas of methodological development such as developing local-area trade data, and in other areas, such as on the open data initiative to assist exporters and UK economic growth.

We found that there is an overall helpful level of description of the quality of the statistics, with a summary of quality issues given online and backed up by a fuller description in the RTS methodology document. You could usefully enhance the method information by explaining the need for, and approach to, apportioning data according to the theoretical economic model. It would also aid users' understanding and provide reassurance if you gave a fuller explanation about the main definitions and coherence with other similar statistics. Straightforward access to the latest quality reports, setting out the main implications for the use of the statistics, would be useful.

The RTS team identified a number of steps that it has taken to provide reassurance that quality assurance safeguards are effective. We welcome the recent release of the report of the asymmetries in trade between UK and EU member states for 2014-2016. Again, it will be helpful to draw out the main implications of the findings to guide the appropriate use of the statistics.

Once again, thank you for engaging effectively with us during this short review. Please let me know if there is any aspect of this letter that you wish to discuss.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Pont', with a horizontal line underneath.

Mark Pont
Assessment Programme Lead