



Office for
Statistics Regulation

Office for Statistics Regulation: Annual Review 2018/19

July 2019

Annex: Office for Statistics Regulation 2018/19

This year has seen the Office for Statistics Regulation mature in several key ways. I am proud of how the organisation we established in November 2016 has enhanced its profile and impact – for example through our work on education statistics – and how engaged the individuals who work in OSR are. This is reflected in our 2018 People Survey scores, which include an overall engagement rate of 77 per cent and very high scores for purpose (94 per cent), leadership and change (91 per cent) and the work we do (88 per cent).

We are really pleased to see how the new Code of Practice for Statistics has been adopted (<https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/code-of-practice/>), – both by producers of official statistics, and more broadly by organisations that publish a range of data outputs. This voluntary adoption of the Code is one of the most significant impacts we have achieved in 2018/19.

And we have adopted a truly systemic perspective – through our reviews of how statistics illuminate and support users in broad policy areas, like health; social care; policing; and skills. Our review of data linkage across Government highlighted the barriers to more use of linked data (my blog described the processes as Kafkaesque) and set out the case for more use of linked data to increase the public value of statistics.

OSR is a relatively young organisation and there are a number of ways we want to enhance our impact in 2019/20. In particular, during the recent Public Administration Select Committee hearings into the work of the Authority, it struck me that we have not always explained our purpose and work as clearly as we could. In response to this, we aim to publish a regulatory vision in the summer of 2019, and to discuss it extensively with stakeholders.

This report describes OSR and how we work. And it sets out the key themes of our work, focusing on what we have seen in the Office for National Statistics and in other producers.



Ed Humpherson

June 2019

The Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) was established in 2016 following the Bean Review. OSR's purpose is to ensure statistics serve the public good. Since then, we have relaunched the Code of Practice; adopted a more systemic approach that considers how well statistics serve the needs of users; and evolved how we use our regulatory tools. In 2019/20 we will publish a summary of our regulatory vision, based on our vision and the three elements of our mission.

Our vision

Our vision is that statistics serve the public good. In a world of abundant data, people should have confidence in statistics produced by government.

Our mission



Our tools

We deliver this mission by setting standards for Government statistics, and ensure that producers (ONS and Government departments, agencies and other bodies) uphold them through:

Assessment of statistics

OSR assesses statistics produced by ONS and other Government producers against the Code of Practice and publishes the Assessment Reports.

Designation as National Statistics

Following these Assessment Reports, we designate statistics as National Statistics. This designation signals to public users of statistics that the statistics meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and value. There are 850 National Statistics. We can also de-designate statistics where there are concerns about their compliance with the Code.

Compliance checks

Assessment Reports consist of detailed analyses of the statistics, and we do not have the resources to look at a large number of statistics in any given year. The risk would therefore be that some producers could go several years between assessments, and not have the focused challenge to improve that assessments provide. So, we have developed a lighter touch review tool called a compliance check which takes less time but highlights issues for the producer to address.

Systemic reviews

Users of statistics rarely use an individual statistical output in isolation. They are interested in broader topic areas. So, we conduct systemic reviews which look at how groups of statistics come together to meet user needs. These reviews take a variety of forms, ranging from detailed reports to convening events to bring users and producers together.

Casework

We look at specific cases of how statistics are used in public debate, leading to us reaching judgements on the case in question. We publish the most significant of these judgements, which can be high profile interventions and can attract significant media attention.

Insight

We are also developing a new stream of outputs called Insight. Insight will be a strategic communications tool, aiming to bring common themes from our work to the attention of a wider audience.

Our governance

OSR's work is overseen by the Regulation Committee. The Regulation Committee is the Board committee which provides strategic overview of our regulatory work and approves regulatory decisions. It is completely separate from ONS and no ONS executives are members of the Committee.

The Regulation Committee reviews and approves our strategy, annual business plan, and budget, and approves all key regulatory decisions on assessment against the Code of Practice. It agrees the broad content and communication of systemic reviews and approves our annual report on casework. The main focus this year has been the regulatory judgements on trade and construction; and the systemic reviews including our flagship review on data linkage and reviews of classifications, social care, policing and public finances.

OSR's work is subject to internal audit review. There have been three main engagements with internal audit this year: a review of casework, which gave a Substantial (green) level of assurance; a review of risk management, which gave a Moderate (amber) level of assurance; and a workshop with internal audit on how best to obtain feedback on OSR work from producers and others. Action plans are in place as a result of all three engagements.

Summary of our outputs in 2018/19

Our Plan on a Page 2018/19 summarises our ambitions for 2018/19 (appendix). It focuses on a series of impacts from our work:

- Improve the value provided by statistics, especially through reviews of statistics on skills, social care and public finances
- Enhance compliance with the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and value, through our programme of assessments and compliance checks
- Use our voice to stand up for statistics, through the public statements we make about the use of statistics
- Adapt our regulatory model to a data rich world, through our review of data linkage and our promotion of the new Code of Practice for Statistics, which is more flexible and relevant to a wider range of data publications

In 2018/19, we delivered:

Assessments completed	Designations confirmed	De-designations	Compliance checks completed	Systemic reviews completed and in progress	Casework completed
8	8	1 (Homelessness in England).	42	15 (9 in progress, six completed).	104 cases investigated, with 33 significant judgements published on our website.

We also published an updated version of the database of National Statistics, which lists all 850 National Statistics published in the United Kingdom.

In 2018/19, our total expenditure was £1.91 million, against an allocated budget of £2.17 million. At the year end, we employed 27.9 Full Time Equivalent staff.

Themes from OSR work: Office for National Statistics

Our regulation of ONS supports the quality and value of ONS's statistics and indicates areas where ONS needs to improve. Highlights for 2018/19 include:

A series of improvements in economic statistics following the Bean Review. Our assessments of Regional Gross Value Added statistics focused on technical improvements and greater timeliness, and our redesignation reviews of both construction and trade demonstrated extensive work undertaken by ONS teams to improve these important statistics. We concluded that the construction statistics now meet the standards to be a National Statistic, but not yet the trade statistics. In our systemic review on statistics for city regions we concluded that ONS had extended its user engagement and provided much more useful information for city regions.

There are exceptions to this general picture of improvement of economic statistics. The main one is statistics on income and earnings. Since our review in 2015 there have been only incremental improvements, and the overall problem – multiple sources, lack of a coherent picture of living standards – has not really been fixed. In addition, across economic statistics there seems to be a series of minor errors reported on a monthly basis. And ongoing ONS work to develop the National Accounts may highlight further areas that require change (eg based on the new purchases survey, which could cast a different light on the supply chain interactions in the economy).

On population and policy we see a strong emerging strategy on migration, based on a steady process of refresh drawing on administrative data sources. Housing demonstrates ONS's greater emphasis on cross GSS leadership, using the new Head of Profession within ONS although there remains a lot to do to support the main producer, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). On health, ONS has agreed to provide leadership to the Government Statistical Service (GSS) producers on this issue, but again there is more to do here.

We have reported publicly a range of quality issues in the population and public policy area, including on travel and tourism and migration statistics, and in our assessment of cancer survival statistics. While these errors do not have a single common cause, we have identified there may be a general theme around how ONS communicates with users about quality concerns and how they impact on the use of the statistics.

One final issue is ONS has not seemed as engaged with the new Code of Practice as other Government Departments. When we first launched the Code we did run a series of workshops in ONS, and the ONS Head of Profession and central teams are aware of the Code. But as a producer,

awareness of the new Code within ONS seems to us to be variable across different teams. Other producers have set up events to communicate the Code's principles more widely than official statistics. We are not aware of any wider adoption of the Code's principles (eg for ONS outputs that are not official statistics). We raised this issue with the National Statistician and ONS has now committed to follow the practice in several Departments and adopt the Code for its publications which are not official statistics. ONS has also not yet implemented the regulatory requirement introduced in February 2019 to update its description of the National Statistics designation. Although adoption by other producers has also been slow, there is an opportunity for ONS as the National Statistical Institute to take the lead here.

Themes from OSR work: Other producers

We also have a significant impact on the producers of statistics across the UK public sector. We support innovation, statistical leadership, communication and public value.

Innovation

Across our work we see a strong appetite for innovation. But producers also face barriers. In England in particular, the linkage of large datasets can be limited by Departmental reluctance to agree to linkage; and everywhere resources are an issue. As a result of these barriers, much of the innovation that we have seen in our work takes place in the presentation and dissemination of statistics, as opposed to the creation of new datasets. Our systemic review of innovation in education statistics highlighted several innovative approaches to disseminating education statistics. The restrictions of the .gov.uk website represent a general constraint to innovative dissemination raised by several producers. Outside England, our data linkage systemic review pointed out successes in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

We have also been particularly pleased to see the growing adoption of the Code on a voluntary basis for publications that are not official statistics – like management information or research outputs. DWP, Defra and MHCLG are leading examples. We list 11 examples of organisations that have adopted the Code on a voluntary basis on our website: <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/code-of-practice/voluntary-application-of-the-code/>.

Leadership

We have highlighted concerns with the coherence and accessibility of statistics on housing and health. In both cases users can be left to form their own picture of what the statistics say, as opposed to being

guided by the producers. In our view, this demonstrates ambiguities as to who should provide statistical leadership (eg in health, should it be the Department of Health and Social Care, NHS Digital or the ONS?). As noted above, the ONS is stepping in to coordinate statistical activity in these areas, thereby providing leadership. But it would be better if this leadership came from within the producer bodies. There tends to be greater coherence outside England (eg in both health and housing). As a related issue we still see many outputs that do not provide insight – simply reporting a series of numbers without much added value.

Communication issues

One of the most significant issues that we have raised over the last year concerns the communication of statistics. We highlighted concerns with the Department for Education in October about misleading uses of statistics. We have also raised concerns about the use of unpublished information by the Scottish Government and MHCLG; and about the communication of statistics by Defra (on plastic straws) and Home Office (on domestic abuse). The unifying thread to these cases is the risk that statisticians and analysts do not have sufficient voice in the internal communication process, and our interventions in all these cases aim to empower the statisticians to raise concerns in future.

Public value

We see several areas where public value of statistics could be enhanced. We published a summary of our work on accident and emergency waiting times statistics in November, which argued that the value of the statistics was undermined because the public purpose of the statistics was unclear; in February we published a summary of social care statistics which highlighted how these statistics are not meeting all user needs in any of the four countries of the UK; and we are due to publish a review of policing statistics which highlights a failure of the statistics to inform public debate about the activities of police forces. We expect this theme of informing public debate, alongside a greater focus on coherence, to feature in our work prominently in 2019/20.

Structure

The work of OSR is led by the Director General for Regulation, who is also the Board's lead advisor on the assessment of statistics and the statutory head of assessment. He is supported by a leadership team which includes the deputy director who leads the London site, and the heads of OSR site offices in Newport and Edinburgh (the Edinburgh site lead role is currently vacant). The offices in London, Newport and Edinburgh are broadly equal in size.

OSR is structured into 12 domains

Senior Leadership Team:
Ed Humpherson – Director General for Regulation
Mary Gregory – Deputy Director for Regulation & Head of London Office
Vacant – Systemic Review Programme Lead & Head of Edinburgh Office
Mark Pont – Assessment Programme Lead & Head of Newport Office



Business Support:
Supports business planning, work programming and management of resources for the office, including support of learning & development.
4.0 FTE support this function

External Relations:
Develops, coordinates and implements the strategy for the external voice and brand of the office. Gathers key intelligence to inform regulation activities.
2.0 FTE support this function supporting this function

Policy & Standards:
Updates and maintains the Code; Develops standards and guidance; keeps up-to-date with cross-cutting and international statistical issues.
1.0 FTE support this function

OSR places a lot of emphasis on allowing staff members at all levels and on all sites to lead on regulatory work and to lead and input into organisational developments. Our culture is one of engagement and commitment to our purpose, supported by values of empathy and respect; trustworthiness; ambition for improvement; and being outward-looking. This culture is reflected in our results from the Civil Service wide People Survey scores, which include an overall engagement score of 77% (10 percentage points higher than the average of high performing units); organisational purpose (94%, five percentage points higher than the high performing average); my work (88%, six percentage points higher); and leadership and change (91%, which is fully 37 percentage points higher than the high performing average).

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Appendix 1: Plan on a Page

Our Purpose

We aim to enhance public confidence in the trustworthiness, quality and value (TQV) of statistics produced by government.

Trustworthiness	Quality	Value
Confidence in people and organisations that produce statistics and data.	Data and methods that produce assured statistics.	Statistics that support society's needs for information.

Our Strategic Drivers 2018/19

Improve the value provided by statistics. This is the key driver that underpins all aspects of our work.

Key Activities and Outputs	Performance Focus
Start reviews on statistics relating to social care, skills and public finances Continuing reviews of health, including mental health, housing and migration statistics Look at the public value of statistics to understand inequalities and on children and young people, and older people Annual Review	We will review evidence on how far these outputs meet the needs of users

Enhance compliance with the highest standards of TQV	Use our voice to stand up for statistics	Adapt our regulatory model to a data-rich world
<p>Key Activities and Outputs Promote the Code among statistics producers.</p> <p>Key assessments include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Construction statistics• Purchases Inquiry• Measuring Tax Gaps <p>Deliver programme of around 40 Compliance Checks.</p> <p>Performance Focus We will review evidence on how far these outputs meet the needs of users.</p>	<p>Key Activities and Outputs Represent users and report publicly on the dissemination and use of official statistics. Extend our communications, bringing together statisticians and users of statistics. Advocate greater statistical leadership.</p> <p>Performance Focus Satisfaction of those who have engaged with us over issues and concerns. Between 10% and 20% of our public 'casework' interventions are self-generated. Our work is respected by the media and key stakeholders. Between 20% and 30% of our work programme be in cross-cutting areas and areas of lower profile.</p>	<p>Key Activities and Outputs Promote voluntary application of the code. Data linkage Systemic Review. Build our expertise and capability in statistical domains.</p> <p>Performance Focus We respond positively to approaches on voluntary application. Engagement with the interactive Code by statistics producers. We use the most appropriate regulatory tool in all cases.</p>