



Office for
Statistics Regulation

User engagement in the Defra Group

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Office for Statistics Regulation

We provide independent regulation of all official statistics produced in the UK. Statistics are an essential public asset. We aim to enhance public confidence in the trustworthiness, quality and value of statistics produced by government.

We do this by setting the standards they must meet in the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#). We ensure that producers of government statistics uphold these standards by conducting assessments against the Code. Those which meet the standards are given National Statistics status, indicating that they meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and value. We also report publicly on system-wide issues and on the way statistics are being used, celebrating when the standards are upheld and challenging publicly when they are not.

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Executive Summary

Why we did this review

Understanding how statistics are used and what users and other stakeholders need is critical to ensuring that statistics remain relevant and provide insight. To achieve this, statistics producers must engage with users.

To explore this aspect of statistics production, we carried out a review of user engagement in the Defra Group. This is our first departmental review of user engagement and the Defra Group¹ made an ideal candidate for such a review. It has a large and broad portfolio of official statistics and National Statistics, with a varied public profile, public interest and impact and is therefore likely to require different approaches to engaging with users.

Through this review we aim to develop a better understanding of the range of approaches to user engagement currently adopted within the Defra Group, and to identify the key features of effective and impactful user engagement. We hope this will support the Defra Group in enhancing its user engagement and provide broader learning for other statistics producers.

What we found

Teams are good at telling users about their statistics, but there is scope to widen the promotion of statistics

The extent of communication with users varies within the Defra Group. We identified some common effective approaches, such as promoting the statistics to interested networks. To ensure that teams are reaching the widest possible audience, we encourage them to consider all available opportunities for promoting their statistics. This should include a range of online channels, and, where possible, sharing of best practice to enhance communication across the portfolio of statistics. We encourage teams to be transparent about upcoming developments to the statistics. As a whole, the Defra Group could expand its social media capability, for instance, by using its [@DefraStats](#) Twitter account to update users on developments to the statistics.

Most teams understand who their users are and how they use their statistics, but could develop a better understanding of broader use

The user landscape of Defra Group statistics is complex and the audiences and users vary considerably. It is therefore important that teams understand this broader use of their statistics to ensure that the statistics are relevant to a wide audience. The Defra Group could continue to build its capability in monitoring the use of its statistics, for example through web analytics, as one of a range of approaches to understanding use of its statistics.

¹ By the Defra group we mean the Core Department and Executive Agencies, Forestry Commission and those Defra Arm's Length bodies that are designated as producers of official statistics: Environment Agency, Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Marine Management Organisation and Natural England.

We found many examples of effective engagement with users and other stakeholders, but some teams could be more proactive in their engagement

Approaches to, and the extent of, user engagement vary within the Defra Group, but user engagement is most effective and impactful when it is embedded within the statistics production process. We found many examples across the group of regular engagement with well-established networks of users, for example, by collaborating with like-minded partners and surveying users. However, some teams could be more proactive in their user engagement by seeking the views of users and other stakeholders rather than waiting for users to approach them. To maintain the relevance of the statistics to all types of users, we encourage them to consider and explore a range of ways of involving users in the production and development of their statistics, and to share learning and insight with other teams in the Defra Group. Teams could enhance transparency and show the breadth of their engagement by regularly publishing information about existing and planned user engagement activities.

The Defra Group is approaching user engagement in a joined-up, strategic way, but this could be more impactful

Through the Defra user engagement policy statement and a user engagement working group, the Defra Group is building insight into its users and the uses of its statistics, and encouraging and fostering user engagement. There is scope however to be more strategic and impactful, for example, through more active use of the Defra user engagement policy implementation plan within departments, and by developing practical guidance and offering specific advice to support teams in their engagement.

Lack of resource was cited as a barrier to user engagement. We encourage all teams to build in the resource for user engagement even if they only have limited resources available. We recommend that teams adopt a flexible and proportionate approach, thinking carefully about where to place the greatest effort with the resources available and how to get the most benefit from their engagement.

Next steps

The Defra Group will provide a response to this review, which sets out the actions it will take to enhance user engagement. We will consider how our future regulatory work with Defra Group statistics can be used to build on the findings of this report. We will also input the findings of this review into the development of the Government Statistical Service's cross-government user engagement strategy, which is expected to be published later in 2020, after the launch of the UK Statistics Authority strategy.

1. Introduction

Why we did this review

Understanding how statistics are used and what users and other stakeholders need is critical to ensuring that statistics remain relevant and provide insight. To achieve this, statistics producers must engage with users.

To explore this aspect of statistics production, we carried out a review of user engagement in the Defra Group. This is our first departmental review of user engagement and the Defra Group² made an ideal candidate for such a review. It has a large and broad portfolio of official statistics and National Statistics, with a varied public profile, public interest and impact and is therefore likely to require different approaches to engaging with users.

What we hope to achieve

Through this review we aim to develop a better understanding of the range of approaches to user engagement currently adopted within the Defra Group, and to identify the key features of effective and impactful user engagement. We hope this will support the Defra Group in enhancing its user engagement and provide broader learning for other statistics producers.

Our approach

We focused our review on a set of 10 statistics which reflect the diversity of the Defra Group statistics portfolio (Annex B). To build on existing knowledge of the user landscape and user engagement activities, we incorporated information from previous and current regulatory work. This included our assessment of Defra's [air quality and emissions of air pollutants statistics](#) and our compliance check of Natural England's [Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment \(MENE\) statistics](#).

We used several sources of evidence to understand the approaches to user engagement currently adopted across the Defra Group. These included:

- a workshop with statistics teams (October 2019)
- meetings with the Defra Group Head of Profession (HoP) and his support staff
- reviewing published information about users, uses and user engagement activities and internal documents and tools
- a short survey looking at user satisfaction.

The survey does not aim to be a representative sample of all users of Defra Group statistics and therefore the results should be interpreted with caution. However, we do consider there is value in the data as they give an indicator of the views of users on the Defra Group's communication and engagement. Detailed findings from the survey, and more information on the limitations of the data, are presented in Annex D.

² By the Defra group we mean the Core Department and Executive Agencies, Forestry Commission and those Defra Arm's Length bodies that are designated as producers of official statistics: Environment Agency, Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Marine Management Organisation and Natural England.

Wider context

The Government Statistical Service (GSS) is currently developing a [cross-government user engagement strategy](#). The strategy is a direct response to the [Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee 2019 report](#) on the dual role of the UK Statistics Authority, which called for the UK statistical system to take a more strategic approach to engaging with all users of official statistics.

The aim of the strategy is to ensure official statistics meet society's needs; it is expected to improve the use and usefulness of official statistics. The strategy, which will be published later in 2020, after the launch of the UK Statistics Authority strategy, will be launched alongside training and guidance materials to help producers of statistics build capability and better engage with stakeholders, understand their users' needs and produce statistics in a way that satisfies those needs.

The new strategy and this review are complementary. We encourage the Defra Group to consult both documents when thinking about and planning user engagement.

2. A framework for user engagement

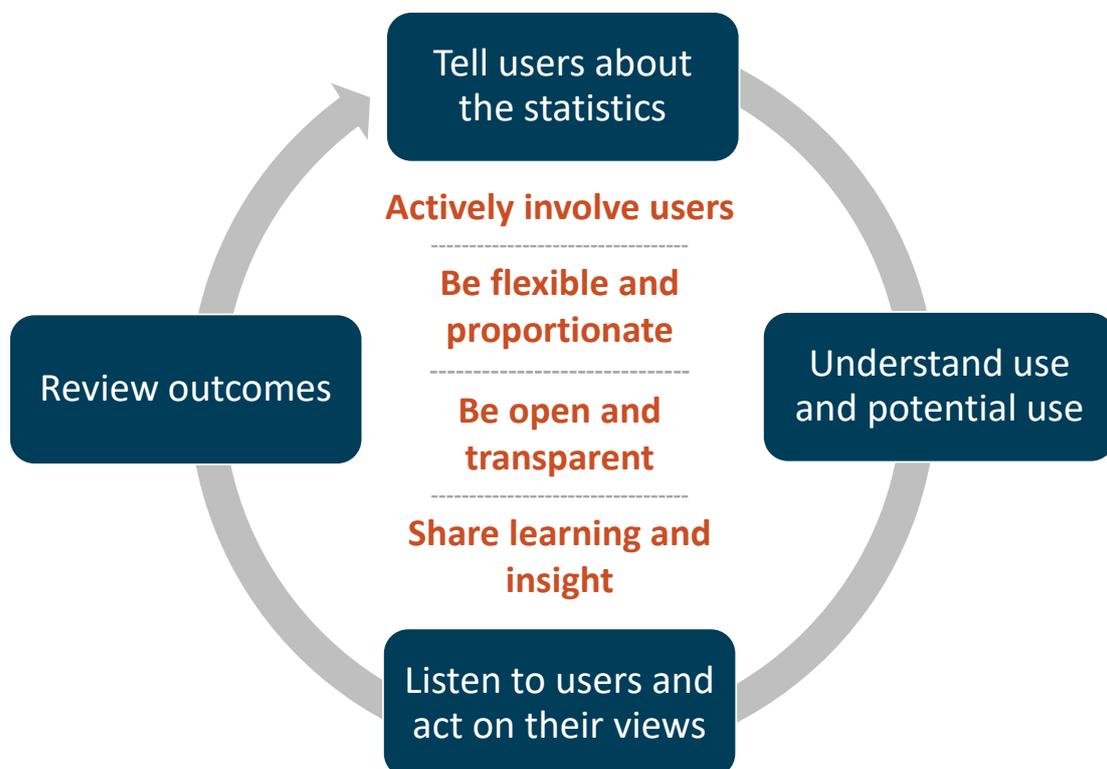
This report sets out our findings in three areas of user engagement.

- **Telling users about the statistics** – promoting use and raising awareness of the statistics; informing users about changes and developments to the statistics; disseminating and presenting to interested networks; and supporting the use of the statistics for a wide range of users.
- **Understanding use** – knowing the types of users and potential users of the statistics and what they need the statistics for.
- **Listening to users** – establishing an ongoing dialogue with users and other stakeholders to understand their needs, involving them in the production and development of the statistics, and acting on their views.

These three areas are not mutually exclusive: for user engagement to be effective, they need to be considered and addressed alongside each other. For instance, telling users about the statistics is vital for maintaining a dialogue.

Drawing on these three areas and the relevant practices of the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) (Annex A), we have developed a simple framework that statistics teams may find helpful when thinking about and planning their user engagement activities.

Figure 1. A framework for user engagement



3. Telling users about the statistics

Telling users about the statistics means promoting use and raising awareness of the statistics; informing users about changes and developments to the statistics; disseminating and presenting to interested networks; and supporting use of the statistics for a wide range of users.

The findings in this chapter are supported by our user survey. The survey does not aim to be a representative sample of all users of Defra Group statistics, but the results give an indication of the views of users on the Defra Group's communication (Annex D).

Key findings

Teams are good at telling users about their statistics, but there is scope to widen the promotion of statistics

Whilst the extent of communication with users varies within the Defra Group, we identified some common approaches to telling users about the statistics.

Some teams promote their statistics to interested networks through external events or by organising events themselves. For example, the forestry statistics team produces a [Forestry Facts and Figures leaflet](#) which summarises the headline forestry statistics and is made available at various events by colleagues in the Forestry Commission and the devolved administrations.

Most teams are telling users about changes to the statistics. This is done by contacting users directly, or more commonly, by drawing attention to changes in the statistical outputs or on the website landing pages. For example, the air quality statistics team told users about an update to the method used to produce the air quality statistics, and its impact on the statistics, via a summary in the statistical bulletin.

At the department level, Defra Group frequently updates the [Statistics at Defra gov.uk page](#) to highlight key developments to its portfolio of statistics, including the publication of experimental statistics (statistics in development) and those sets of non-official statistics to which it is voluntary applying the Code of Practice. We welcome this transparency in reporting.

Defra promotes its official statistics publicly via a dedicated statistics Twitter account ([@DefraStats](#)). Currently, the account is used mainly to announce the release of statistics. Defra is gradually moving on from using social media to signpost new releases to including simple headlines or infographics that summarise trends in the statistics, which is more informative and useful for users. As with other policy departments, however, there is caution about using Twitter as a channel to focus on potentially contentious information or trends, partly to avoid individual pieces of information being taken out of context. Statistics teams told us they think the Twitter account needs additional resource to become an effective tool for communicating with users.

Case study: promoting and supporting use of statistics – MENE statistics

The Natural England Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) statistics team ran a user conference in September 2019 to promote the latest statistics, which was attended by many users from inside and outside government. The event provided an opportunity for Natural England to tell users directly about the latest published statistics, and it encouraged interaction between users. The team continues to update users and other stakeholders about the development of the new People and Nature Survey (MENE's replacement) through a mailing list.

The team is also supporting use of the statistics in specific ways, for example, through running training sessions for Natural England staff. Most attendees are familiar with the MENE statistics but have never done their own analysis of the raw data. The training session gives them the confidence to undertake their own analysis, which increases use and understanding of the data within the department.



The results of our user survey suggest that users are broadly happy with the level of communication: around three fifths of respondents said they were satisfied, with most other respondents having no strong view. Many respondents confirmed that they receive updates about developments to the statistics, for example through a newsletter, mailing list or the gov.uk website.

- **To ensure teams are reaching the widest possible audience, we encourage them to consider all available opportunities for promoting their statistics, and, where possible, to share best practice to enhance communication across the portfolio of statistics.**

Teams may like to explore online channels other than social media, such as blogs, articles and online forums (such as [StatsUserNet](#) or sector-specific forums) to raise awareness and encourage greater use of their statistics.

- **To update users about planned changes and provide an opportunity for them to feed into the development the statistics, we encourage all teams to communicate upcoming developments to users.**

While teams are good at telling users about changes to the statistics after they have happened, they are less transparent about upcoming developments to the statistics.

- **The Defra Group could expand its social media capability, for instance, by using its @DefraStats Twitter account to update users on developments to its statistics.**

The Defra Group as a whole is supporting use of its statistics through improving accessibility

The Defra Group has focused heavily on improving the accessibility of its statistical outputs and website landing pages in order to meet the September 2020 deadline for the government-wide accessibility requirements. For many outputs this means changing publication format from PDF to HTML. Several teams, including the MENE team and the bovine TB team have developed interactive tools such as dashboards to bring the statistics to life, and the Defra Group told us it would like to develop more such outputs to enhance accessibility.

Limitations of the publishing platforms can form a barrier to effective communication with users. For example, many teams highlighted the restrictions of publishing statistics and data on gov.uk, with new products like interactive dashboards having to be hosted elsewhere.

Another challenge to supporting use of the statistics is the complexity of the subject matter. For instance, the bovine TB statistics present headline epidemiological measures of the spread of disease in cattle populations; each UK biodiversity indicator is composed of one or more measures of species abundance and diversity, and depends on a variety of data; and some measures of the economic performance of the agricultural industry, such as total factor productivity, are complex composite measures. This complexity means an increased risk of misunderstanding, misinterpretation, or potentially even misuse, by users. Therefore, clear and accessible explanations of the statistics (and limitations of the data) are needed to support use and understanding.

- **We encourage the Defra Group to continue to enhance the accessibility of its statistics and data to support use for a wide range of users.**

4. Understanding use

Understanding use means knowing the types of users and potential users of the statistics and what they need the statistics for.

The findings in this chapter are supported by our user survey. The survey does not aim to be a representative sample of all users of Defra Group statistics, and is not intended to give a sense of the scale of users and uses, but still revealed some interesting patterns (Annex D).

Key findings

Most teams understand who their users are and how they use their statistics, but could develop a better understanding of broader use

The user landscape of Defra Group statistics covers many different types of users and uses. Some statistics are niche with a small group of specialist users which scrutinise the statistics closely, for example, milk prices statistics. Some statistics have a broader audience, as they relate to high-profile policy areas, for example air quality statistics, or because they are of wide public interest, for example the UK Biodiversity Indicators. Users of Defra Group statistics include industry, commercial experts, local government, academics and non-governmental organisations, among others.

The results of our user survey suggest that there is limited overlap between the users of most sets of statistics, with most respondents indicating that they use just one set of statistics. As an example, most survey respondents said they use either agriculture or environment statistics, not both, a finding that echoes the results of the Defra Group 2016 consultation on its portfolio of statistics (Annex C). Even though the topic areas can be quite separate, we heard that some users of environment statistics use a range of different statistics, which highlights that there may be common users within a topic area.

We found that most teams have a good understanding of the types of users and uses of their statistics, but that understanding of the broader set of users and uses is more limited. Many teams emphasised the challenge of identifying potential users and wider use of the statistics, for example, by the general public, and engaging ‘beyond the usual suspects’.

- **We recommend that teams develop an broader understanding of who their users are and how the statistics are used to ensure their relevance to a wide audience.**

It is important that teams hear from a range of voices, otherwise there is a risk that certain voices dominate and that the feedback collected does not reflect wider user needs. We recognise however that not all sets of statistics, particularly those with a specialist audience, have a large or meaningful broader user base to access, and that a proportionate approach to understanding use, based on the public profile and interest in the statistics may be needed.

Teams could enhance transparency about users and uses

We found several examples of clear published information about the types of users and uses of the statistics. For instance, the [milk prices statistics methodology report](#) includes a good description of the data users. In some cases, the information is published but is not signposted as clearly as it could be, such as the [summary of the users and uses of the family food statistics](#).

We also found that many teams do not maintain details of their users. Some teams have, or are in the process of setting up, a distribution list for users and other stakeholders. Generally, they find these lists helpful, particularly for user engagement exercises like surveys. To help teams direct and coordinate user engagement activities, we encourage teams to make the best use of the available information on users. Defra's [personal information charter](#) provides helpful information to support teams in doing this, by setting out its standards for requesting or storing personal information.

- **Teams could enhance transparency and demonstrate their understanding of use by regularly publishing information about the types of users and uses of the statistics.**

Web analytics is supporting understanding of use

Defra has a dedicated publishing team that collates summaries of the number of times a webpage, statistical bulletin or dataset has been viewed or downloaded (Annex B). We heard that this information is helping teams to understand patterns of use, including those statistics and data which are not being so widely used. For example, the family food statistics team has used information on the number of downloads to reduce the number of datasets it publishes alongside the statistics. The Defra Group comprises a mix of organisations, some of which have their own publishing teams. Some organisations publish statistics and data on gov.uk (Defra, Natural England) whereas others publish on separate websites (Forest Research and JNCC) or the website of the relevant non-governmental organisation (JNCC). This means that some teams may have less capability and support for web analytics. In general, statisticians within the Defra Group highlighted that they could make better use of web analytics.

Web analytics can only tell you so much about use of statistics and data. They do not necessarily reflect the 'intensity' of use or offer insight into the relative value that users attach to different forms of publication. For example, we heard how the farming press and farming unions often comment on the total income from farming statistics, but it is unclear whether farmers access this information through these secondary sources or by going directly to the Defra statistics.

- **We encourage the Defra Group to continue to build its web analytics capability as one of a range of approaches to understanding use of its statistics.**

5. Listening to users

Listening to users means establishing an ongoing dialogue with them and other stakeholders to understand their needs, involving them in the production and development of the statistics, and acting on their views.

The findings in this chapter are supported by our user survey. Although the survey does not aim to be a representative sample of all users of Defra Group statistics, the results do give an indication of the views of users on the Defra Group's engagement (Annex D). Additional information on specific user engagement activities is provided in Annex C.

Key findings

We found many examples of effective engagement with users and other stakeholders

We found many examples of regular engagement with well-established networks of known users. Some statistics teams have built strong relationships with key users and influencers, including those in policy teams in the Defra Group, non-governmental organisations, trade associations, industry groups and academics. We found that these teams seek out views from users and other stakeholders and act on this feedback to maintain the relevance, insight and quality of the statistics.

In this section we outline a few examples of effective approaches to user engagement, drawn from the ten sets of statistics selected for the review. These examples illustrate that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to user engagement – activities may look different for different statistics and may need to be tailored to different types of users. Notwithstanding this, we identified **common approaches**, all of which highlight that user engagement is most effective and impactful when it is embedded within the statistics production process.

Utilise formal user networks – we spoke to several teams who successfully engage directly with key stakeholders and users through expert or working groups. These can be a useful way of enhancing the quality and value of the statistics by gaining input into the production and development of the statistics. An example is the bovine TB statistics working group, which brings together Defra statisticians, policy officials, veterinarians and epidemiologists from across Great Britain and provides input on data cleansing and the development of new outputs.

Case study: asking experts for input – Forestry Statistics

The [Expert Group on Timber and Trade Statistics \(EGTTS\)](#) discusses and advises the forestry statistics team on the production and development of official statistics about the timber trade.

Its members are drawn from across government and the timber industry. The group meets three times a year: at the beginning of the annual data collection process, before initial estimates are published, and at the end of the production cycle to discuss further analysis of the data. The group is heavily involved in quality assuring the forestry statistics and reviewing data gaps, and adds expert insight on trends in the statistics. The group is also used by the team to update the distribution list for data collection. The team told us the group is supportive and that their expertise has enhanced the forestry statistics.



Collaborate with like-minded partners – for some teams, partnerships with users outside government are a successful way of adding value for a wide range of users, and in some cases, are essential for the production of the statistics. Examples we observed in our review included the following.

- The MENE statistics team worked with academics to develop questions for a new Nature Connection Index (NCI) module for the MENE survey. This partnership boosted the visibility of the MENE statistics and has led to the publication of scientific papers in high-profile academic journals.
- Nearly 100 organisations from across government, research bodies, and the voluntary sector provide the data used to compile the UK Biodiversity Indicators, with most data suppliers also key users of the statistics. Close cooperation and collaboration with these organisation continues to support the accuracy, relevance and coherence of the statistics and data, and users have a number of channels through which to input into their development (Annex D).

Case study: collaborating with users outside government – Bovine TB statistics

The bovine TB statistics team collaborated with Dr Andrew Robertson at the University of Exeter to develop a new interactive dashboard of bovine TB data. It was part of a [TB Knowledge Exchange](#) project, funded by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), which aimed to “increase the impact and accessibility of bovine TB data and science”. The team met with the academic to discuss the origin and quality of the data, and helped convert the data into the correct format. The prototype was developed by the academic but the team now maintains and publishes the dashboard. The [first iteration of the dashboard](#), which provides headline measures at the county level, was published alongside the quarterly statistics in March 2020. The team will be reviewing and developing it on an ongoing basis, and is looking to promote the dashboard widely to internal and external users.



Survey your users – gathering user feedback on statistics via a survey was a popular choice in some of the teams we spoke to, particularly when used as part of a range of approaches to understanding user need. We heard that surveys were most useful for gathering general feedback, rather than detailed issues. One such team is the forestry statistics team who run an in-depth user survey every two or three years; the latest survey focused on the Forestry Statistics compendium publication. The team finds the survey results useful for confirming existing user requirements and for identifying gaps and priorities.

Case study: collecting user feedback on an ongoing basis

To gather user views on the content, format and release of the Food Statistics Pocketbook, a compendium publication which includes the family food statistics, the statistics team launched a short, continuous survey through Google Forms. Almost 100 people completed the survey over an 18-month period and the team continues to receive responses. The team said it was a helpful exercise as users confirmed they were happy with the changes to the format, and the team made additional improvements to the output based on the feedback.

The air quality statistics team recently launched a similar continuous survey to gather views on the emissions of air pollutants statistics, and other teams told us they have also considered this approach. There are advantages to continuous surveys – the survey is easy to manage and is less onerous for users to complete – but it may provide less detailed insight about user needs.



Use existing information to generate insight – another common source of feedback is direct contact from users, for example, ad hoc requests for disaggregated data. Several teams, including the air quality statistics team, log the queries and Freedom of Information (Fol) requests they receive from users, and review them on an annual basis to pull out themes to help drive improvements to the statistics. This is also done at the department level – a central Defra team monitors and analyses general queries received through the environment statistics group mailbox (enviro.statistics@defra.gov.uk) and pulls together anonymised summaries for each topic area. Teams told us these summaries are generally helpful but that they may not always have the resource to act on all requests and suggestions.

Not all engagement is effective or impactful, and some teams could be more proactive in their engagement

In some areas we found limited evidence of regular engagement, with some teams taking a more passive approach and waiting for users to come to them. The results of our survey suggest that there is room for improvement; less than half of the respondents said they were satisfied with the Defra Group's level of engagement, with the largest number of respondents having no strong view. Many respondents said they have provided feedback on the statistics, and of those who were aware that changes were made to the statistics, almost all were satisfied with the change. But less than half of respondents indicated that they were confident that the Defra Group listens to and acts on views from users or that they had adequate opportunities to input into the development of the statistics.

Across the Defra Group, we found that there is limited engagement with potential users. Many teams we spoke to expressed an interest in asking the broader public about their statistics and said they would welcome guidance on this. One route to wider engagement may be through policy channels. For example, we heard that some teams intend to work closely with policy colleagues to make statistics a focal point of broader stakeholder engagement and discussions. This could be a resource-effective way of developing a better understanding of broader user needs, particularly for those policy areas with active, established stakeholder engagement. The Defra Group may like to consider the extent to which this can be done across its statistics portfolio.

- **Some teams could be more proactive in their user engagement by seeking the views of users and other stakeholders rather than waiting for users to come to them, and by anticipating how user needs are likely to evolve over time.**

To maintain the relevance of the statistics to all types of users, we encourage teams to explore a range of ways of involving users in the production and development of their statistics, such as those outlined above.

- **To maximise the impact of engagement, and reduce burden on users and statistics teams, all teams should share learning and insight, particularly where there is overlap in the users and uses of statistics.**

To ensure that user engagement is, and continues to, support the value and quality of all statistical outputs, we recommend that teams regularly review the outcome of user engagement activities and make adjustments as necessary (for example, by establishing more regular contact with a particular groups of users).

Teams could enhance transparency around user engagement activities

We found several examples of clear and detailed published information on user engagement activities. For example, the Forest Research website has a [dedicated page for user engagement](#), which contains the findings, recommendations and implementation plans from recent user surveys, and a page for the Expert Group on Timber and Trade Statistics (see above). Similarly, the JNCC website contains a helpful summary of the various project and steering groups involved in the production of the UK Biodiversity Indicators (Annex C). In general however, we found that teams publish limited information about existing or planned user engagement activities.

- **Teams could enhance transparency and show the breadth of their engagement and the ways in the which users can shape their statistics, by regularly publishing information about user engagement activities.**

Highlighting the opportunities available may encourage users to feed into the production and development of the statistics. It is important to be transparent about the outcomes of individual user engagement activities and to make it clear publicly how and when teams have taken on board feedback. For example, teams should publish the findings and actions from user surveys, even if feedback is gathered on ongoing basis.

The Defra Group is approaching user engagement in a joined-up strategic way, but this could be more impactful

In addition to the activities of individual teams, the Defra Group is building insight into users and uses, and encouraging and fostering user engagement, across its statistics portfolio. For example, Defra has published a [User Engagement Policy Statement](#), which sets out its commitments to user engagement and how it intends to meet those commitments, and developed an internal implementation plan for the policy, which outlines the actions that individual teams are invited to commit to (see case study). Defra has recently appointed a user engagement champion who may be able to push and promote the implementation plan. Defra has also set up up a User Engagement Working Group to take forward specific initiatives, such as web analytics. These activities are core Defra department-focused and teams in arm's length bodies (ALBs) are free to adopt the Defra approach, or develop their own procedures. Most teams we spoke to, including those in ALBs, are aware of the policy statement and told us they have found it broadly helpful in guiding thinking on user engagement by giving them a common standard to work towards.

Case study: a strategic and joined-up approach to user engagement

Defra's [User Engagement Policy Statement](#) contains a clear summary of who its users are, what users want, and how it engages with users. The key objectives are "to ensure that our statistics are of value to our users, informing debate and having an impact on decision-making" and it includes number of commitments that draw on the practices of the Code.

The statement acts as a reference point for both statistics teams (it provides guidance) and for users – it is a public statement of ambition. It was developed collaboratively by the Head of Profession support staff and the User Engagement Working Group. Other government departments, such as [Ofsted](#), [Ofqual](#) and [NHS England \(PDF\)](#), have produced similar statements or strategies. The internal implementation plan for the policy has several aims, such as identifying and categorising the range of users and user groups, determining usage trends, and developing insight into user needs, and for each aim there are a number of actions and measures of success.



The Defra Group has also gathered user views across its statistics portfolio in recent years. In 2016, it ran the first (and so far only) group consultation, which gathered feedback on a set of specific proposed changes to its official statistics and the uses made of the statistics. The Defra Group told us that the consultation gave it the information it needed to make the proposed changes, and helped it understand how and why its statistics are being used. However, many of the comments were not as useful for wider developments to the statistics. In 2018, Defra carried out a short survey via the @DefraStats Twitter account which asked users about their interests and needs. The Twitter survey however received only a small number of responses from users across the statistics portfolio and Defra told us it did not generate as much insight as hoped. This illustrates the challenge of gathering useful feedback across a broad statistics portfolio with a complex user landscape.

- **We welcome the Defra Group’s joined-up approach to user engagement, but there is scope to be more strategic and impactful.**

We encourage teams to consult the Defra user engagement policy implementation plan on a regular basis to ensure that they are working towards a shared standard of user engagement, and are using all available tools to plan and guide user engagement.

- **To support teams in their engagement, the User Engagement Working Group could develop practical guidance and offer specific advice on certain aspects of user engagement, such as working with press office and identifying potential users.**

- **When planning future department-wide engagement exercises, the Defra Group may find it helpful to learn from the approaches of others.**

For example, it could look at the [extensive user research conducted by the Office for National Statistics](#) to build insight into use of statistics and data, or consult guidance and resources on using social media platforms to gather user/customer intelligence published by organisations like the [Market Research Society](#).

Lack of resource was cited as a barrier to user engagement

Teams identified two different but related challenges with resourcing user engagement activities: a lack of time to do user engagement in the first place and lack of resource to implement the changes users want to see (once identified). Some teams explained that they struggle to find time to engage with users on top of their business-as-usual activities due to competing priorities. For some sets of statistics, including the suite of agriculture statistics, implementing the government wide accessibility requirements (see Chapter 4) continues to be resource-demanding, which teams say has reduced their capacity for user engagement.

When consulting users about the statistics, teams can end up with a long user ‘wish list’ of areas for improvement and it may not be possible to act on the views of all users or meet all needs, or it may be too costly to implement the changes. For instance, there is increasing demand from users for local and regional data, something which is seen as particularly valuable for some Defra Group statistics, such as the air quality statistics and the waste statistics. This level of detail is not possible for all outputs. For example, due to the nature of the data, it is difficult to disaggregate the national estimates of emissions of air pollutants to the country level, let alone the local authority level. Here, user engagement may be helpful in identifying a user need for local data, but there is a risk that the team is seen as unresponsive if the need cannot be met.

When considering these challenges, teams should think of user engagement as a tool for guiding and supporting decision-making. As highlighted earlier, there is no one way of doing user engagement and we have recommended that teams adopt a flexible and proportionate approach. Teams should think carefully about where to place the greatest effort with the resources available and how to get the most benefit from that engagement. We appreciate that these decisions may not always be easy or straightforward; however, regular engagement will lead to a better understanding of use and user needs and greater user involvement, which will help set direction for the development of the statistics.

We understand that the last few years have been particularly challenging for the Defra Group in terms of resourcing. Defra is one of the UK Government departments most affected by EU exit, and resources allocated to the development of statistics have been diverted to supporting policy teams in preparing for EU exit. More recently, COVID-19 is having an impact on the collection of data and production of statistics. Understandably, the Defra Group's short-term focus is on maintaining as many of its official statistics outputs as possible and prioritising analysis that supports understanding of the effects of COVID-19 on food, farming and the environment. This means that the coming year will not be a normal time for the production of statistics and for investment in continued improvement, and there may be limited scope or capacity for enhancing user engagement. While the recommendations in this report should be seen as a reference point for more normal times, some recommendations are achievable in the short term, and we encourage teams to consult this report on an ongoing basis.

- **We encourage all teams to build in the resource for user engagement, even if they only have limited resources available.**

Sharing learning and insight and, where possible, working together to engage with users, may reduce the burden on individual teams and maximise the impact of user engagement. If user needs cannot be met, then teams should provide feedback to users and be transparent about the reasons for the decisions made and the constraints.

6. Conclusions and next steps

Engaging with users – telling them about the statistics, understanding how and why they are used and listening to users – is an essential part of producing statistics. Involving users in the production and development of the statistics ensures that the statistics help them answer key questions and that they are high-quality, relevant and accessible.

The user landscape of Defra Group statistics is complex. The audience and users vary considerably and there seems to be limited overlap between users of different sets of statistics. As such, approaches to user engagement vary considerably within the Defra Group; what is effective for one set of statistics may be less well-suited to others.

We identified many examples of good practice and are encouraged by the extent to which teams are engaging with users. We found that many teams promote their statistics and tell users about changes to the statistics, that they have a good understanding of the types of users and uses and that they engage regularly with a well-established network of known users in a variety of ways. We also welcome that the Defra Group is taking a joined-up, strategic approach to user engagement to gain insight into users and uses and to encourage and foster user engagement across departments.

We also identified several ways in which user engagement could be improved or enhanced. Some teams could be more proactive in their engagement by seeking the views of users and other stakeholders and exploring a range of ways of involving them in the production and development of the statistics. Teams could enhance transparency and demonstrate their knowledge of the types of users and uses, and the extent of their engagement, by publishing information about users, uses and user engagement activities. As a whole, the Defra Group could be more strategic and impactful by encouraging and supporting teams in their user engagement and could continue to build its capability in areas like social media and web analytics to enhance communication with users and develop understanding of use.

Across all three areas (telling users about the statistics, understanding use, and listening to users) it is important that individual teams and the Defra Group as a whole adopt a flexible and proportionate approach to engaging with users. They should think carefully where to place the greatest effort with the resources available and how to get the most benefit from that engagement, and where possible, share learning and insight.

The Defra Group will provide a response to this review, which sets out the actions it will take to enhance user engagement. We will consider how our future regulatory work with Defra Group statistics can be used to build on the findings of this report. We will also input the findings of this review into the development of the Government Statistical Service's cross-government user engagement strategy, which is expected to be published later in 2020, after the launch of the UK Statistics Authority strategy.

Annex A: What does the Code of Practice for Statistics say about user engagement?

These are the main practices that relate to telling users about the statistics, understanding use, and listening to users.

Trustworthiness

- T4.1** Organisations should be transparent about their approach to public engagement with users, potential users, and other stakeholders with an interest in the public good served by the statistics.
- T4.2** A work programme should be established and regularly reviewed. Statistics producers should be open about progress towards meeting priorities and objectives. Users and other stakeholders should be involved to help prioritise statistical plans.

Value

- V1.1** Statistics producers should maintain and refresh their understanding of the use and potential use of the statistics and data. They should consider the ways in which the statistics might be used and the nature of the decisions that are or could be informed by them.
- V1.2** Statistics producers should use appropriate ways to increase awareness of the statistics and data, communicate effectively with the widest possible audience, and support users and potential users in identifying relevant statistics to meet their needs.
- V1.3** User satisfaction with the relevance and usefulness of the statistics and data should be reviewed routinely. This should consider the timeliness, accessibility, clarity and accuracy of the statistics and data.
- V1.4** Statistics producers should engage publicly through a variety of means that are appropriate to the needs of different audiences and proportionate to the potential of the statistics to serve the public good. An open dialogue should be maintained using proactive formal and informal engagement to listen to the views of new and established contacts. Statistics producers should undertake public engagement collaboratively wherever possible, working in partnership with policy makers and other statistics producers to obtain the views of stakeholders.
- V1.5** The views received from users, potential users and other stakeholders should be addressed, where practicable. Statistics producers should consider whether to produce new statistics to meet identified information gaps. Feedback should be provided to them about how their needs can and cannot be met, being transparent about reasons for the decisions made and any constraints.
- V1.6** Statistics producers should periodically review whether to continue, discontinue, adapt or to provide the statistics through other means, in discussion with users and other stakeholders.
- V1.7** New and innovative ways to engage users, potential users and other stakeholders should be considered and adopted as appropriate.

Annex B: Statistics considered in this review

Table 1. Subset of Defra Group National Statistics and official statistics

The 10 sets of statistics selected for this review are broadly representative of the Defra Group statistics portfolio. They cover a range of topics, users and uses, and represent Arm's Length Bodies as well as the core Defra department.

Department	Publication	Coverage	Status	Frequency	Number of pageviews (2019)*
Department for Environment Food, and Rural Affairs (Defra)	Air Quality Statistics in the UK	UK	National Statistics	Annual	10,498
	Emissions of Air Pollutants in the UK	UK	National Statistics	Annual	7,175
	Family Food Statistics	UK	National Statistics	Annual	13,721
	Statistical Digest of Rural England	England	Official Statistics	Annual	3,621
	Statistics on Tuberculosis in Cattle in Great Britain	Great Britain	National Statistics	Quarterly	4,086
	Total Income from Farming	UK	National Statistics	Annual	3,514
	UK Milk Prices and Composition of Milk	UK	National Statistics	Monthly	9,515
Defra and Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC)	UK Biodiversity Indicators	UK	National Statistics	Annual	3,984
Forest Research	Forestry Statistics	Great Britain	National Statistics	Annual	14,458
Natural England	Statistics from the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE)**	England	National Statistics	Annual	8,240

* The figure is the total number of pageviews of the gov.uk landing page for that set of statistics. Because users are likely to view the same page multiple times (either within the same session or at different points in time), the number of unique users will be lower, but it serves as a useful proxy.

** The MENE survey ended in 2019 and has been replaced by the [People and Nature Survey for England](#). The final MENE statistics were published in September 2019.

Annex C: Supporting information about Defra Group user engagement activities

This annex contains additional examples of user engagement activities carried out by statistics teams in the Defra Group, focusing mostly on the sets of statistics selected for this review (Annex B). It also includes a brief summary of activities at the department level.

User engagement activities carried out by statistics teams

Expert groups and advisory groups

Air Quality Expert Group (AQEG)

[AQEG](#) provides independent scientific advice to the government on levels, sources and characteristics of air pollutants in the UK. It regularly uses emissions inventory and air quality data to assess policy and science questions related to air quality. It also provides advice on the quality of the data and the restructuring of the air quality monitoring network (which measures the ambient concentration of air pollutants), which has improved the quality of the air quality statistics.

Bovine Tuberculosis Eradication Advisory Group for England (TBEAG)

[TBEAG](#) advises government on the development and implementation of the strategy for eradicating bovine TB. The group focuses mostly on policy issues but it is a key user of the bovine TB statistics. The statistics team regularly interacts with the group; each month the group receives a separate cut of the data at the county level to examine high-risk areas. Overall, the team finds it a less effective forum for gathering feedback than the bovine TB statistics working group (see below).

Working groups, steering groups and project groups

Bovine TB statistics working group

The working group meets three to four times a year to discuss developments to the statistics. It was initially set up to increase the visibility of bovine TB statistics and data in the public domain. The group has provided input on the development of a range of new outputs, including an interactive dashboard (see Chapter 5) and a release on pre- and post-catte movement testing, and has discussed ways of gathering feedback from users.

Milk statistics project group

The project group discusses statistical matters directly with key industry stakeholders, including UK dairy groups, cheese groups and the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) (the levy board which represents farmers, growers and others in the supply chain). For example, it consulted the AHDB on a proposed methods change to the milk utilisation statistics (a related set of statistics to those on milk prices). The team told us this close engagement has been beneficial; by involving them in the development process, they are more likely to champion the statistics.

UK Biodiversity Indicators groups

The production and development of the UK biodiversity indicators involves [several groups](#). Sign-off for developments and new indicators goes through the UK Biodiversity Indicators Steering Group (BISG) whose members include Defra, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), devolved government bodies and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). BISG is responsible for agreeing new indicators and ensuring that their presentation is fit-for-purpose. The Indicator Project Group (Defra and JNCC) then

implements the indicators and makes decisions about their detailed presentation or technical issues, but may consult the Steering Group where needed. The Project Group is responsible for the production of the annual UK Biodiversity Indicators publication.

There is also a [Biodiversity Indicator Forum](#), which meets on an ad hoc basis and brings together a wide range of expert stakeholders from across government, academia and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to discuss specific issues, challenges and ideas relating to the UK Biodiversity Indicators. It takes stock of activity on biodiversity indicators, and looks at available data sources and gaps in information. The team told us these meetings have led to specific improvements to the accuracy and coherence of certain indicators. The team finds the meetings helpful for establishing and solidifying links with users outside government.

Forestry statistics review group

In 2018, the forestry statistics team set up a review group for the Forestry Statistics compendium publication, with the aim of ensuring that it has the content users need. The group has a representative from each government (UK and Devolved Administrations), the private sector and trade associations. The group held meetings and a workshop to discuss and prioritise areas for development. Some were implemented quickly by the team, but it sought user views on the more significant developments through a user survey (see below). It highlights the value of the task and finish group approach for enhancing the relevance, clarity and insight of statistics.

Partnership and collaboration with users outside government

MENE statistics

The MENE statistics team collaborated with several external organisations, including a [National Outdoors for All Working Group](#) including NGOs such as the National Trust and the University of Derby and the University of Exeter, to add new questions to the MENE survey. The questions for the Nature Connection Index were added in 2015 as a result of this collaboration. It is an ongoing partnership; the team told us that regular bilateral meetings with this key academic user form a core part of its user engagement.

Milk prices and crop statistics

The milk prices statisticians have a long-standing, constructive relationship with a small number of expert users, including the AHDB. The team told us they have become more joined-up with AHDB to enhance the coherence of published statistics. For example, they used to publish different figures, but now there is agreement on a single official figure. AHDB assists with quality assurance and adds insight from the industry, which the team finds helpful, given the short turnaround for these statistics (they are published on a monthly basis). AHDB recently took over responsibility from Defra for publication of official statistics on cereal crops, and the crop data are produced in partnership.

User surveys and consultations

Forestry statistics user surveys

The September 2019 user survey, which focused on the Forestry Statistics compendium, asked users about their use of the statistics, whether the statistics are meeting their needs, and a range of possible improvements (such as the addition of new topics). The results and implementation plan from the survey will be published later this year. The forestry statistics team acts on the feedback gathered through previous surveys. For instance, a recommendation from the 2016 survey (which covered the whole portfolio of forestry statistics) was to continue ongoing work on improving and expanding wood fuel statistics. In response, the team set up a sub-group of the Expert Group on Timber and Trade Statistics on wood fuel data quality and methods, which includes several members from

the Expert Group, a statistician from the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), and a trade association representative.

Bovine TB statistics user consultation

In 2014, Defra, the Welsh Government and Scottish Government team carried out a joint consultation on specific changes to the statistics. The consultation sought feedback on changes to the headline measures, additional indicators and the frequency of publication, and it asked users about how the statistics are used. The consultation received 13 responses from a broad range of sectors and organisations. In spite of the small number of responses, the statistics team told us the consultation led to a better understanding of the users, their satisfaction with the statistics, and in particular, the main uses of the statistics. The team published a separate [document on the users and uses](#) alongside the summary of responses.

Feedback through group mailboxes

Defra has several group mailboxes for different topic areas, including environment statistics (enviro.statistics@defra.gov.uk) farming statistics (various) and rural statistics (rural.statistics@defra.gov.uk). It encourages users to direct any general enquiries to these mailboxes and to contact individual teams if they have a query about specific publications. A central Defra team produces anonymised summaries for each topic area with queries broken down by type of organisation, subject matter and type of comment. For some topic areas, the volume of queries is relatively high. For example, in 2019, Defra received 81 queries about its waste and recycling statistics, with most requests for the latest data or more granular breakdowns of the data. Defra told us it cannot use the correspondent's contact details as an avenue for further engagement because Defra's Privacy Notice does not cover this use of personal data.

User engagement planning and activities at the department level

User Engagement Working Group and other internal groups

In March 2018, Defra set up an internal User Engagement Working Group (UWEG) as a forum for discussing approaches to user engagement. Its members are the Defra Group Head of Profession (HoP), his support staff, the three Defra website publishers (who arrange publication of data and statistics on gov.uk) and several lead statisticians, including the Defra representative for the GSS's Presentation and Dissemination Committee. According to the HoP, the group has focused mostly on "low-hanging fruits" such as web analytics and improvements to the accessibility of the statistics, and they would like to see it continue to develop.

The quarterly Defra Group lead statisticians' meeting, which is chaired by the HoP, is also used as a forum for discussing approaches and issues related to user engagement, such as balancing the needs of different types of users.

Defra Group statistics consultation and Twitter survey

The 2016 consultation on proposed changes to Defra Group official statistics included questions on stopping data collection, stopping or changing the frequency of publication, and optimising survey design and sampling regime. The consultation received 42 responses from a range of stakeholders, including businesses, national and local government, voluntary sector and charities, and academia. As outlined in the summary of responses, the consultation was valuable because it confirmed that there is strong external interest in Defra Group statistics, and it has helped the Defra Group understand how and why its statistics are being used. It said it would build on the consultation through

continued engagement with key stakeholders, but it is unclear whether this has been effective and impactful.

The 2018 Twitter user survey was the Defra's first attempt to engage directly with users through the @DefraStats Twitter account. The survey asked respondents questions about their interests and needs (example question: 'What sort of changes to Defra's statistics would you want to better meet your needs?'). The survey received 12 responses from users with an interest across the statistics portfolio. Some suggestions for improvements to specific sets of statistics could be assigned to individual teams, but it is unclear whether these were taken forward.

Annex D: User survey results

Approach

We carried out a survey between January and February 2020 to gather views from users of Defra Group statistics on how well the Defra Group communicates and engages with them. The survey included questions about which statistics are used, satisfaction with communication and engagement and providing feedback, among others. We used an example to define communication and engagement in the survey: letting users know about the statistics (communication) and being given the opportunity to talk to statisticians about how the statistics might develop (engagement).

We encouraged statistics teams to contact their users and stakeholders about the survey. The survey was promoted on the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) website, the OSR Twitter account ([@StatsRegulation](#)), the Defra official statistics Twitter account ([@DefraStats](#)) and the Defra statistics landing pages on gov.uk.

How this survey demonstrates trustworthiness, quality and value

Trustworthiness

We used an online survey tool (SmartSurvey) that is GDPR-compliant, and information collected was handled appropriately and stored securely. We are transparent about the reasons for conducting the survey and have published all results.

Quality

We are transparent about the data and methods used, including their limitations. The survey does not aim to be a representative sample of all users of Defra Group statistics. However, we do consider there is value in the data in that it gives an indication of the views of users on the Defra Group's communication and engagement. The findings should be interpreted with caution and we have added caveats throughout the report.

Value

The survey was a useful source of evidence for the review. It helped us form a judgement on the user landscape of the statistics and the extent to which the Defra Group tell users about the statistics and listens to users. We have aimed to present the findings in an accessible way and interpretation is supported through visualisations.

Limitations of the data

The survey has a relatively small sample size. Due to some incomplete responses (see below) and the structure of the survey the number of responses received for each question varied.

The survey does not aim to be a representative sample of all users of Defra Group statistics. Because the respondents were self-selecting – we asked statistics teams to contact their users and stakeholders about the survey – there are several potential sources of bias:

- We only heard from known users, many of whom are probably expert users, and who may be more likely to be or feel engaged.

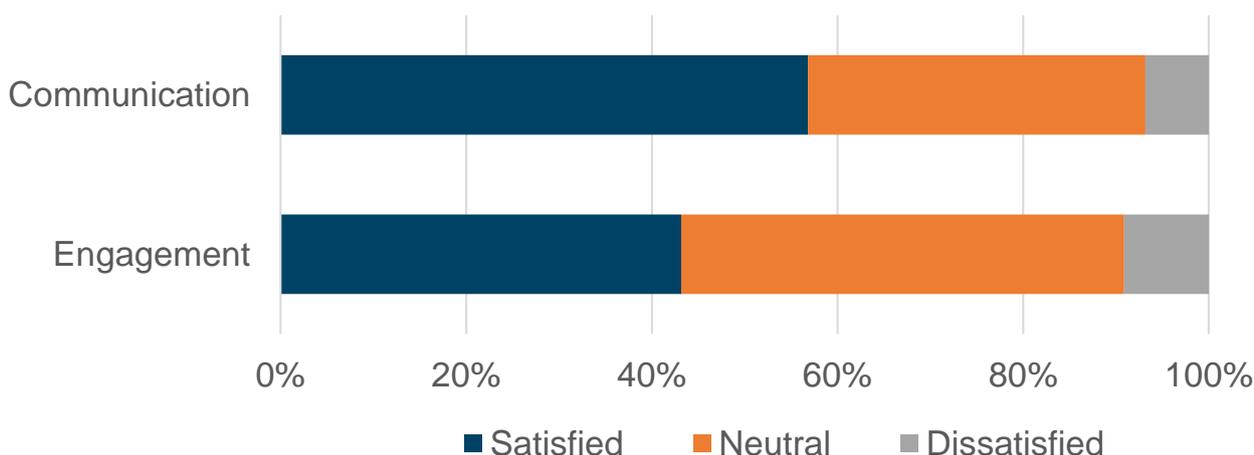
- We received more responses from users of some sets of statistics, which could be due to teams having contacted more stakeholders and users and/or having a more engaged user base.

Because some respondents indicated that they use more than one set of statistics, and the small sample size for some sets of statistics, we did not consider the level of satisfaction for individual sets of statistics. This means the results may hide variation in user satisfaction within the Defra Group statistics portfolio.

Key findings

Respondents said they were more satisfied with the Defra Group’s communication than its engagement (Figure 2). Around three fifths of respondents (25 out of 44) said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the Defra Group’s level of communication, with many respondents (16) having no strong view. In contrast, around two fifths (19 out of 44) said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the level of engagement, with more respondents (21) having no strong view. This suggests that users are broadly happy with the level of communication (telling users about the statistics), but there is room for improvement on engagement (listening to users).

Figure 2. User satisfaction with Defra Group communication and engagement (44 responses)



Detailed findings

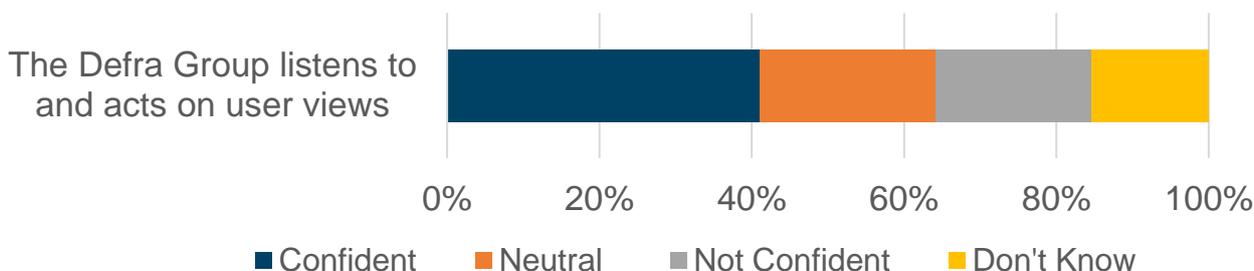
Just over half of survey respondents (22 out of 41) said they have provided feedback on the statistics, but a large number (17) indicated that they have not and do not intend to. The most common route for providing feedback was through representation on an expert or technical advisory group (which may reflect the composition of users and stakeholders who were contacted for this survey). Respondents also indicated that they provided feedback through formal consultations, user surveys, at user events or by contacting the statisticians directly, with around half of respondents (10 out of 20) using multiple routes to provide feedback.

Most respondents (14 out of 19) who indicated that they had provided feedback had commented on multiple areas. The most common area was methods or the quality of the statistics or data (14 responses). Of those respondents who were aware that changes were made to the statistics based on their feedback, nine out of 11 said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the changes that were made, with the remainder having no strong view. We also asked respondents if they have had adequate opportunities to provide

feedback on the statistics. Most respondents (14 out of 21) answered 'Don't Know', with the remainder answering 'Yes' (4) or 'No' (3).

Around two fifths of respondents (16 out of 39) said they were confident or very confident that the Defra Group listens to and acts on views from users (Figure 3). A roughly equal number of respondents said they have no strong view (9), they are not confident or not at all confident (8), or they don't know (6).

Figure 3. User confidence in the Defra Group listening to and acting on views from users (39 responses)



A number of respondents (10) indicated they had contacted Defra Group statisticians directly to provide feedback or to ask a query about the statistics, all of whom found the response of the statisticians helpful or very helpful.

Under half of respondents (17 out of 39) indicated that they receive updates about developments to the statistics. Most updates are received through a newsletter or mailing list from the Defra Group (10 responses), but some respondents also said they receive updates through the gov.uk website or another organisational website, the statistical bulletin, a newsletter or mailing list from a third party, or Twitter or other social media.

We also asked respondents if they have had adequate opportunities to input into the development on the statistics. The largest number of respondents (17 out of 44) answered 'Yes', with a roughly similar number answering 'No' (12) or 'Don't Know' (10).

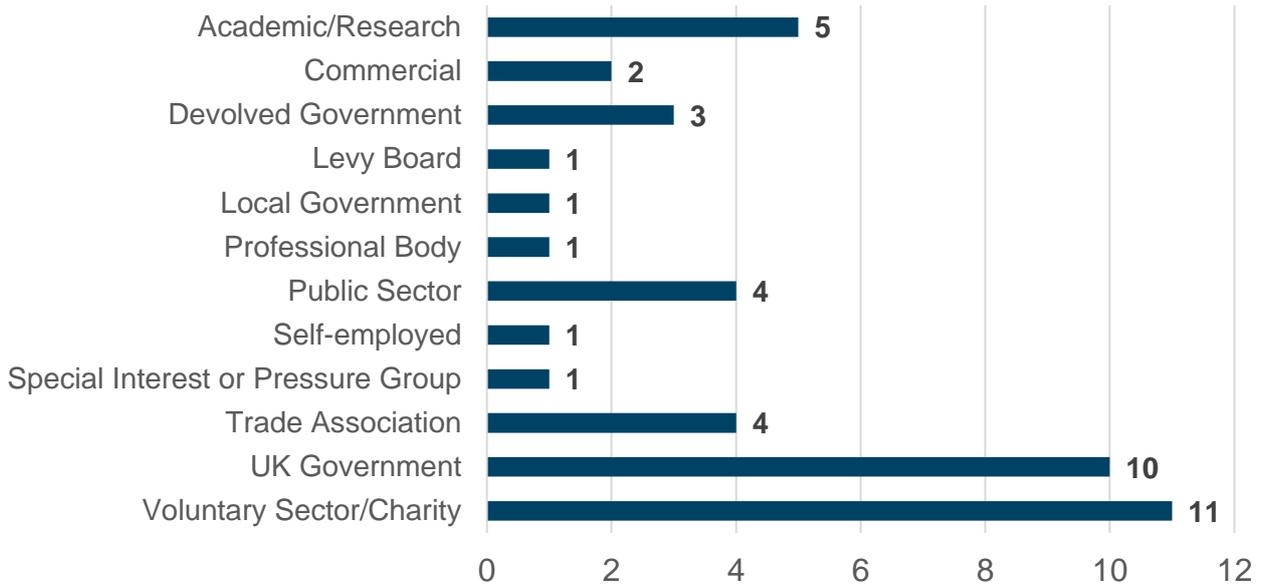
Some respondents highlighted specific things that the Defra Group is doing well. For example, they said they have had opportunities to feed into the process of updating data collection (MENE statistics), they are impressed with the level of communication and engagement (forestry statistics), and they find the statistics useful (rural statistics).

Respondents also provided suggestions for improvements. Generally, they would like to see better engagement to ensure the statistics are published in a user-friendly and relevant format, and more use of public engagement and sharing of statistics. They also had some specific suggestions, including to create a statistics user group (rural statistics), publish dashboards and greater focus on online presentation (forestry statistics), and improve the accessibility of data and information on methodology (air quality and emissions of air pollutants).

Summary of responses

We received 34 complete responses and 10 incomplete responses. The respondents came from a range of organisation types, including UK government, the voluntary sector, academia and research, the public sector and trade associations (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Types of organisations survey respondents work for (44 responses)



We received responses from users of all 10 sets of statistics, with the most responses from users of MENE statistics (Figure 5). All responses came from individuals rather than groups or organisations.

Figure 5. Statistics used by survey respondents (43 responses)

