

REGULATORY GUIDANCE

COVID-19: Guidance on the Suspension of National Statistics Status

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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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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is changing the way that data are available to statisticians to produce official statistics. This has resulted in cases where existing National Statistics:

- Are still of adequate quality for their intended uses (perhaps accompanied by more information on strengths and limitations)
- Are of a level of quality that has slipped to a substantially lower level that makes them less useful
- Have stopped being produced altogether, and in some cases have been replaced (either permanently or temporarily) by new official statistics

The Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) has been impressed and fully supports the responsiveness of producers to these challenges, and by the professionalism and integrity shown by producers as they approach the task of ensuring that decisions to use alternative sources or methods are taken in line with the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#).

This note guides producers in considering whether National Statistics status continues to be merited in these situations, and reinforces the supportive approach of OSR in working with producers to review National Statistics status.

National Statistics status

National Statistics status provides a clear public signal that statistics meet the highest standards of statistical practice. It means that users can have confidence that the official statistics fully meet the standards of the Code of Practice for Statistics – i.e. that the producers and their processes are trustworthy, that the statistics are of high quality having used sound methods and suitable data, and are valuable, providing insight and being equally accessible to all.

Where changes have been made to the data sources and methods used to produce a National Statistic, statisticians are carefully considering the impact that the changes have on the quality of the estimates.

1. In some cases, the use of alternative data sources – often multiple sources used in conjunction with each other – along with appropriate descriptions of strengths and limitations, means the resulting statistics are still of adequate quality for their intended uses. In these cases, it is appropriate that the statistics continue to have National Statistics status.
2. In other cases, quality is likely to have slipped to a standard that doesn't meet the previous high standards of quality and are not entirely suitable for their intended uses. In those cases, we consider it appropriate that producers signal the change in quality by agreeing temporary suspension of the National Statistics designation with OSR; this supplements the producer's own statements about quality and reinforces the need for users to ensure that they are aware of the change in quality as they use the data, avoiding the potential for users to be over-confident about the robustness of the estimates. The types of situations in which suspension should be considered include:

- a. **The mode of the data collection has changed**, for example, switching from face-to-face interviewing to online or phone completion
- b. **The coverage and completeness of the data collection has been substantially impacted**, for example, the representativeness of the sample of units cannot be maintained consistently, such as, from business and local authority returns
- c. **No data are available from the usual source** and an alternative source of data has been identified
- d. **The statistics cannot be subject to the normal level of quality assurance** – while the data continue to be collected from the usual sources, the normal means of validation such as triangulation with other sources are no longer available so that variations in the statistics cannot be confirmed

The occurrence of any one of these situations does not automatically result in the suspension of the National Statistics designation. Producers may review the revised approach and be satisfied that they can demonstrate sufficient quality to justify the continued designation.

3. In extreme cases, the approach to the production of statistics has changed so much, for example because the availability of the original data has been so restricted that it is not possible to produce the same statistics as those designated as National Statistics. In such cases, the new statistics should be regarded as new experimental or official statistics replacing (either temporarily or permanently) existing National Statistics, without a formal de-designation.

Suspension and restoration of National Statistics status

We encourage producers to discuss changes in the quality of their statistics with us informally, to explore whether suspension of National Statistics status would be appropriate. We would expect to take a proportionate and pragmatic approach to agreeing each suspension – in most cases we envisage an informal conversation followed by email confirmation to be adequate. We expect suspensions to be time-limited, and would expect to agree ending each suspension quickly based on assurances from Heads of Profession for Statistics.

As usual we would encourage producers to be clear in their own communications about the status of their statistics. Producers could use text in their publications such as “The National Statistics status of these statistics has been suspended because of reduced quality during the COVID-19 pandemic”, with appropriate additional detail and links as considered helpful.

OSR will include all statistics for which the National Statistics designation is suspended during the course of the coronavirus pandemic in a table on our [website](#). We will note the type of situation impacting the statistics in the reason for suspension.

The regulatory role

Under the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007, only OSR, as the regulatory arm of the UK Statistics Authority, can remove the designation of National Statistics. OSR maintains a watching brief over all National Statistics and can intervene at any point if there are concerns about compliance with the Code of Practice.

Further information about the National Statistics designation is available in our [policy document](#).

