



Office for
Statistics Regulation

National Statistics Designation Review: Phase 1 Exploratory Review

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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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1. Introduction

- 1.1. The world is changing. The widespread availability and use of data (from within and beyond government departments) provide new opportunities and challenges for official and National Statistics to remain useful and relevant. Making fine distinctions between categories of official statistics (National v official v experimental) may make much less sense in a world of abundant data: management information, analysis, open data, etc.
- 1.2. The [2016 Independent Review of Economic Statistics](#) by Professor Sir Charlie Bean recommended a 'more nuanced assessment of the status of a statistic than is conveyed by the binary National Statistics designation'. Also in 2016, the [Stocktake of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics](#) highlighted two aspects of the designation that would benefit from further consideration: clarifying the use of the designation for 'families' of related statistics by statistics producers; and, reviewing the shelf life of the National Statistics designation. The Authority published the second edition of the [Code of Practice](#) in February 2018 and it has now been successfully embedded in government statistics. The [voluntary application](#) of the Code pillars (of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value) has been established for non-official data and statistics.
- 1.3. The Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) has conducted an exploratory review to see whether the time is right to look at the meaning and value of the NS designation: does it meet the needs of official statistics in serving the public good in a data abundant world? And, if required, what further developments should be conducted?
- 1.4. This paper summarises the findings from the exploratory review in which we spoke to a range of stakeholders, to get an initial steer on the value and usefulness of the NS designation. It presents recommendations that OSR and official statistics producers can consider, to improve the information for users about the status of official statistics.
- 1.5. Most importantly, we set out plans for a further, **more detailed phase of research**. This fuller review of the NS designation will aim to elicit the customer demands for the designation: why they want it, what they want it for, how to make it as useful as possible.

2. Approach

- 2.1. The exploratory review was conducted by OSR in partnership with the GSS Good Practice Team in the Best Practice and Impact (BPI) Division of the Office for National Statistics (ONS). In October 2019, we elicited the views of stakeholders about the NS designation, in the wider context of official statistics, experimental statistics, and non-official statistics produced following the voluntary application of the Code pillars (see Annex A: Test Material).
- 2.2. We commissioned Burns and Company to run two group discussions of around 2 hours each, with members of the public. The groups were of 5-6 people who seek out statistics to help with their work or personal lives, in two age ranges (22 – 40 and 41 – 65). The participants were not statistics professionals but used statistics, for example, searching for unbiased facts about topical issues, seeking data to help them make informed decisions about pensions or investments, looking for information to help with their studies.
- 2.3. We spoke to 25 stakeholders from a wide range of backgrounds, including journalists, academics, think tanks, policy and communications officials, in five small group discussions at a roundtable event. We obtained the views of statistics producers through a series of meetings, including with the Chief Statisticians of two devolved administrations, the GSS Statistical Policy and Standards Committee, GSS Policy and Dissemination Committee, and the BPI division of ONS. We also held workshops with staff in the three OSR sites.
- 2.4. We have collated the responses and comments received to present some overarching messages about the NS designation, official statistics and the regulatory role of OSR. These findings are described below. We then set out some suggestions for next steps and areas for further investigation.

3. Findings

a) Semantics and jargon

- 3.1. Through the engagement activities it became clear that the key terms of 'National Statistics', 'official statistics', 'experimental statistics', and 'voluntary adoption of the Code' are problematic in various ways. In short, it may not be entirely clear what customer need the current designation landscape is serving.
- 3.2. 'National' in National Statistics is ambiguous in its meaning – whether it refers to geographic coverage or to something of national importance. 'Official' was not found clear in terms of its breadth – it could be taken to mean a company's or a school's official figures and to not necessarily convey its governmental scope. 'Experimental statistics' received mixed reactions – some thought the concept sounded untested and cautionary, while others felt it sounded innovative and new. 'Voluntary adoption' was not felt to be clear in its meaning, again with 'adoption' being ambiguous.

b) Designation v accreditation

- 3.3. 'Designation' is not a term in wide use and had to be explained to mean accreditation to those new to the concept of National Statistics. Overall, users did not find designation influenced their use of statistics. Those working in official statistics producer organisations said the concept was important in setting ways of working and protecting their independence.
- 3.4. There was clear demand for an assessment process. It was felt by some in the producer groups that there was scope for them to review the range of their statistics, to ensure that the most important statistics are being prioritised and seen to fully comply with the Code of Practice for Statistics. However, the Assessment process was described as burdensome and off-putting, so that there was a desire for a proportionate approach to be adopted by the regulator. This criticism of the Assessment process was also highlighted in the [Code Stocktake](#) in 2016 – it is something that OSR has responded to by changing the process to minimise the evidential burden on producers and improve the scheduling of the reviews to better fit statistics production timings. However, it remains the case that where an Assessment identifies improvement actions to ensure Code compliance, producers must provide the resource needed.
- 3.5. Voluntary compliance with the Code was widely described by participants as being worthwhile for those statistics that couldn't be published as official statistics. There seems to be significant demand in this space.

c) National Statistics logo

- 3.6. Users said that a label showing the status of having been designated as National Statistics was not important to them. Those unfamiliar with the concept took the

logo to mean the statistics had been produced by the Office for National Statistics. For expert users, who understand the concept of designation, the presence of the logo didn't affect their choice to use the statistics. They said they would use other statistics without the logo.

- 3.7. However, for statistics that had been de-designated, knowing that the designation had been removed was said to be of greater importance to them. It would not necessarily stop them from choosing to use the statistics, but they needed to understand the nature of the failures (of Code compliance) exhibited by the statistics.

d) Fitness for purpose grading and verification levels

- 3.8. A suggestion made across all conversations was the need for users to have a means to better judge the suitability of the statistics in terms of quality or fitness of purpose for the intended uses. It was described in various forms, such as a five-star rating, for example, on different aspects of quality (such as the [ESS quality dimensions](#)), a gold/silver/bronze rating, and a credit-ratings type score. This is an area of interest we can explore further – in particular, understanding what information is needed by users when deciding whether to use some statistics and how to effectively summarise that information.
- 3.9. The focus groups also identified that the descriptions provided for each type of statistic indicated different levels of verification: that National Statistics were verified by the regulator but that official statistics may not have been. The groups were less confident about using statistics that had not been independently verified. They felt it was important to be clear about who verifies that the standards are being met.

e) Clearer accountability of NS, OS and VA

- 3.10. Several respondents said they felt it was important to provide clear, prominent statements showing that the statistics are regulated by OSR. They felt that this should be done not just for National Statistics, but also for official statistics and those produced by organisations choosing to voluntarily apply the Code pillars.

4. Conclusions

Recommendation 1: It is important to clarify key terms and phrases

- 4.1. 'National Statistics' is not a phrase that is commonly understood, even after two decades of use in government statistics. It is not a clear, direct statement of what it pertains to represent. However, it was recognised by stakeholders that the concept is helpful to producers of official statistics in maintaining high standards of professionalism and integrity in their production.
- 4.2. Terms can be made clearer; for example, some suggestions made are:
 - Adopting the term 'accreditation' in place of 'designation'
 - Replacing 'experimental statistics' with the term used in Scotland of 'statistics in development'
 - Replacing 'voluntary adoption' [of the Code] with 'voluntary application'

Recommendation 2: The accountability of producers and the responsibilities of the statistics regulator should be made clear on statistics

- 4.3. Statistics producers should include a prominent statement near the top of statistical releases stating, for example, that they are 'Regulated by the Office for Statistics Regulation'. This regulatory statement should be supported with further clarification of any improvement notice relating to the statistics.
- 4.4. Those organisations voluntarily applying the Code of Practice should give a link beside the regulatory statement to their own published Statement of Compliance, setting out how they adhere to the standards of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value.

Recommendation 3: The level of verification could be clarified

- 4.5. Clarifying the level of verification would enable the degree of independent scrutiny of the statistics to be clear to users. It could be done through a statement, such as, 'Regulated by the Office for Statistics Regulation' or, for example, by clarifying the self-assessment of compliance by the producer body.

Recommendation 4: Ask users about the information they require, to assess the fitness for purpose of the statistics, and identify alternative approaches to communicating this information

- 4.6. There are some aspects of the National Statistics designation that require further thinking, debate and development. Further research should be undertaken to identify what users require to help their decision making about the use of data and statistics and how to present this information prominently and clearly.
- 4.7. There are likely to be a range of options. Other regulators adopt a range of approaches in how they present their judgements; national statistical institutes in

other countries measure and show the status of their official statistics in different ways; and beyond statistics and regulation a range of practices are in use by other organisations, including 5 star-rating systems (open data); gold/silver/bronze (Teaching Excellence Framework); or graduated rankings like AAA+, AAA- (credit ratings agencies). The key is to first focus on the needs of users in understanding and making informed choices about the data and statistics, and then to identify and test a wide range of alternatives. The approach used must be transparent.

- 4.8. The UK Statistics Authority will therefore initiate a development programme into the benefits for users on adopting this type of approach. This programme will consider the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of describing the level of verification and the fitness for purpose of the information, and the implications for the National Statistics designation.

5. Further research and development

- 5.1. On the broader question of the National Statistics designation, it is clear there is a fundamental underlying question surrounding the purpose of and user demand for a designation. Understanding this need is required prior to changing the nomenclature of 'National Statistics'.
- 5.2. We will convene a steering group involving Heads of Profession for Statistics, external users and other stakeholders to oversee a more extensive research programme and engagement exercise to ascertain and explore demand, and to advise on implementing changes to the National Statistics designation. The group will report to the Authority Board.
- 5.3. The project will consider a range of research, to investigate options for constructing and communicating the nature of the National Statistics designation and status of the official statistics. We will seek to collaborate with experts and stakeholders, such as bringing together expertise in government statistics, academia, communication and other regulatory bodies, in conducting this research. We will involve users by sharing proposals regarding the designation and in testing concepts and designs. Our consultation will investigate the recommendations stemming from this exploratory review.

6. Next steps

- 6.1. We will publish a development plan for the next phase of this review of the National Statistics designation and publicise opportunities to formally input into the programme.
- 6.2. We welcome hearing from stakeholders throughout the process. Please do contact us by emailing regulation@statistics.gov.uk.

Annex A: Test Material

User perspective of official statistics, National Statistics, experimental statistics and statistics produced under the voluntary application of the Code pillars

What users can understand from seeing the label ‘official statistics’

‘Official statistics’ means that you can have confidence that the people and organisations producing the figures are applying the standards of the *Code of Practice for Statistics* of trustworthiness, quality and value – this means that they:

- are ethical and honest in using any data
- have a strong culture of professional analysis
- respect evidence
- are open and transparent about the strengths and limitations of its statistics
- communicate accurately, clearly and impartially
- are committed to engaging publicly to understand user needs

What users can understand from seeing the label ‘National Statistics’

‘National Statistics’ are the most important official statistics that have been demonstrated to meet the very highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and value, set out in the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#). Only they carry the unique logo of the **National Statistics tick mark**, having been accredited (or as we say ‘designated’) by us – the Office for Statistics Regulation, the regulatory arm of the UK Statistics Authority. ‘National’ in this context does not relate to the coverage being the UK or to a whole nation. Instead, it is more akin to a national asset (like a national treasure) – a national information asset. We maintain a list of all National Statistics on our [website](#).



Under the statistics legislation, the producers must make sure they continue to fully meet the standards of the Code. We carry out occasional checks to see that this happens. The people producing the statistics must tell you and us when that is no longer possible. This can arise when there are substantial issues that mean that the producers cannot guarantee the quality of the statistics. This is especially serious when the statistics could be misleading if published without an appropriate warning. In these kinds of situations, **we remove the National Statistics logo**.

If the statistics remain useful but should be used with caution, then we allow them to be published as **official statistics** – but they must be clearly marked to show how they should be interpreted and how they can be used safely. Once the issues have been fixed and we have confirmed that all is well, the statistics can show the NS logo again. We see maintaining the integrity of the NS designation as one of our most important functions as the regulator of statistics.

You can see which statistics have had the designation as National Statistics removed (‘de-designated’) by visiting our [website](#) – shown in our **Register of De-designations**. You can access the correspondence about the issues and see which statistics have been re-designated as National Statistics.

If you have any queries about National Statistics, contact us at regulation@statistics.gov.uk.

What users can understand from seeing the label ‘Experimental Statistics’

‘Experimental statistics’ are official statistics that are being developed by statistics producers to take advantage of new data sources or methods. They help ensure that official statistics remain relevant to society. They are evaluated to verify that they meet the needs of users and are of appropriate quality.

We encourage you to get involved in the development and evaluation by sharing your thoughts and experiences of using experimental statistics with the producer. Don’t hold back – your input can make the statistics fit for purpose and better match your needs.

What users can understand from seeing the label ‘Voluntary adopter of the Code pillars’

‘Voluntary adoption of the Code pillars’ means that the producer commits to applying the pillars of the Code of trustworthiness, quality and value in the production and publication of their statistics – which are not official statistics.

The organisations commit to demonstrating their trustworthiness, such as by behaving with integrity and professionalism; having effective business processes and being accountable for decision making; and by respecting the security and confidentiality of people’s information.

The organisations commit to ensuring quality by using data and methods that produce assured statistics: using appropriate data to meet the intended uses; using the best available methods and being open about their choices; ensuring that the data and statistics are quality assured and as robust as possible.

The organisations commit to delivering value in their analysis and statistics, such as by placing users at the centre of analysis and statistical production; producing statistics that are useful, easy to access, relevant and provide insight for the intended audiences; and, seeking to improve their statistics through collaboration and efficiency.

If you have any concerns about statistics that are being published by a voluntary adopter of the Code pillars, do email us at regulation@statistics.gov.uk.