
Director General for Regulation**Sir Ian Diamond, National Statistician**
(by email)

7 April 2020

Dear Sir Ian

ONS OPINIONS AND LIFESTYLE SURVEY COVID-19 QUESTIONS

I am writing to endorse the new official statistics ONS is about to publish which measure the public's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I would like congratulate everyone involved for their work to produce these timely and valuable statistics in challenging circumstances.

My team has conducted a [rapid regulatory review](#) of these statistics, which are based on a module of questions asked in the Opinions and Lifestyle (OPN) survey. We have reviewed the extent to which they have been produced in accordance with the Code of Practice's Trustworthiness, Quality and Value pillars, while taking account of the pressures ONS has faced to deliver timely statistics about a rapidly evolving situation. A summary of our findings, and some recommendations, is set out below. More detailed feedback has been provided to your team.

Value

- We welcome the rapid development of these statistics so they could support the UK Government's pandemic management, demonstrating their high relevance to policy makers. Following their publication, their public good will be further demonstrated by helping a wider range of organisations and the general public to understand how citizens have adapted their behaviours in response to the pandemic.
- While extensive user consultation about the questionnaire topics was not possible due to time constraints, ONS worked with senior policy and analytical leads across government to help identify priority topics for the survey. These included Departmental Directors of Analysis, Heads of Profession for Statistics, the Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies, and the Civil Contingencies Secretariat. This is an on-going dialogue and has been extended to cover the published outputs. We welcome your commitment to seek wider user feedback about the published outputs and to develop them further as time progresses.
- Early results were shared on a provisional basis to the Civil Contingencies Secretariat for operational planning. We judge this entirely appropriate in the context of a public health emergency. The statistics and data tables will now be published weekly from 9 April. We encourage you to work with the UK Data Service and others as appropriate to enable the microdata to be available via a suitable route as soon as reasonably possible.
- Statistical coherence is particularly important during crisis situations to avoid large amounts of potentially conflicting information creating confusion and concern. ONS has attempted to minimise this by identifying other data being collected (on behalf of government and others) and by working with other statistics producers commissioning similar work. We welcome official statistics producers gathering data about the public's response to the pandemic working together to identify ways to minimise duplication and support coherence.
- It will be helpful for ONS to include references to other sources of similar statistics in published articles and, where necessary, to explain any major differences in estimates for similar topics.

Quality

- These statistics have been developed at a much faster pace than usual for the OPN, but it is an established data collection tool with a strong quality-assurance infrastructure around it to support the questionnaire design, programming, data collection, data processing and analysis stages. This foundation provides significant reassurance around quality.
- ONS's experts in questionnaire design and testing are leading the survey development to overcome the fact that questions can't be tested as extensively as would usually happen.
- We welcome the wide range of quality assurance of the collected data. ONS might want to consider centralising responsibility for oversight of the whole quality assurance process across each delivery stage to mitigate more fully any risk of error and ensure that assurances around quality of the published data are as robust as possible.
- Given the circumstances and the salience of the topics covered, there will be additional scrutiny of these statistics compared to a standard release based on this survey. We encourage ONS to ensure that the methodological information provided about the sample design, response and any potential biases is sufficiently accessible and detailed to support this enhanced degree of public scrutiny.

Trustworthiness

- We welcome the quick establishment of clear lines of accountability and responsibility up to the National Statistician. This has helped with clear decision-making around the questionnaire contents and analytical outputs.
- We also welcome that resources have been reprioritised quickly to enable people to work on this. It has required a considerable effort from lots of different teams. ONS should ensure that resourcing requirements are reviewed regularly as the survey waves progress and ensure that staff wellbeing is maintained while delivering under pressure.

We look forward to seeing these statistics develop as further waves are published. As set out in the guidance on changes to statistical outputs you can include a statement in your release such as "These statistics have been produced quickly in response to developing world events. The Office for Statistics Regulation, on behalf of the UK Statistics Authority, has reviewed them against several key aspects of the Code of Practice for Statistics and regards them as consistent with the Code's pillars of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value."

I am copying this to Iain Bell, Deputy National Statistician for Population and Public Policy.

Your sincerely



Ed Humpherson

Director General for Regulation