Consultation paper

Review of the National Statistics Designation – phase 3

January 2021

## 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.

# Consultation Paper: Review of the National Statistics Designation – Phase 3

The Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) is undertaking a review of the NS designation to understand how it should be designed to reflect fitness for purpose in a data-abundant world. As part of our phase 3 research, we would like to hear the views of official statistics producers in relation to four strands of research:

Provenance: How can statistics producers show the public that they are applying high professional standards, that the public’s trust is merited?

Fitness for purpose: How can statistics producers provide users with clear current information about the quality of the data/statistics to aid users’ choice and interpretation?

Value: How can we tell the national life story using National Statistics?

Accountability: How can statistics producers show they are held to account?

In this consultation paper, we set out the four research strands and invite the written reflections from the Chief Statisticians/Heads of Profession for Statistics and lead officials in each official statistics producer body. You may wish to reply about all four areas but otherwise you may prefer to focus on particular questions of interest to your situation and practice. All comments are very welcome. Please send written responses to [**regulation@statistics.gov.uk**](mailto:regulation@statistics.gov.uk)by 26 February 2021.

We are holding focus groups on 29 January 2021and9 February 2021 – do let us know if you would like to attend one of these sessions. We are also happy to hold individual conversations with Heads of Profession and provide webinars about the project for producer organisations.

Please contact Penny Babb by emailing [penny.babb@statistics.gov.uk](mailto:penny.babb@statistics.gov.uk) if you have any queries, would like to attend a session or have a webinar. Information about this project and our exploratory review is available through [NS review web page](https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/national-statistics/review-of-the-national-statistics-designation/).

## Strand 1: Provenance – how can statistics producers show the public that they are applying high professional standards, that the public’s trust is merited?

Views about the provenance or source can help people make quick decisions about whether to trust or use some information. They consider whether they have experience of the provider in the past and found them to be reliable and make a judgement to trust or not to trust.

The National Statistics designation is the only physical sign applied to statistics to show the regulatory determination of compliance with the [Code of Practice for Statistics](https://code.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/). The achievement of the National Statistics designation can be seen as a statement about the behaviour of the producer organisation in relation to some of its most important statistics. It is an earned achievement that producers can be proud of.

We are interested in the nature of the signal sent through the collective achievement of the designation – repeatedly over time and/or range of statistics. That signal may be inferred to go beyond the individual statistics, to be a broader statement about the producer organisation and its approach to official statistics and the application of the Code.

We heard from some heads of profession during our [NS designation exploratory review](https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/national-statistics-designation-review-phase-1-exploratory-review/) about their application of the Code when producing official statistics (OS) and National Statistics (NS). We would like to get a fuller understanding about the nature of the application of the Code within producer bodies and across the statistics system. Focusing on your experiences within your organisation, you may find it helpful to consider the following questions:

1. Do you apply the Code of Practice standards similarly to both NS and OS?
2. How does the designation make a difference in your statistical practice?
3. How does the designation help or hinder?
4. How would you like to see the designation of National Statistics be:   
   a) presented, b) used, c) promoted?

Research Strand 1 Question: How can statistics producers show the public that they are applying high professional standards, that the public’s trust is merited?

Please provide your answer here – feel free to respond in relation to all or some specific questions, or to respond more broadly about the topic area raised in this strand. Use as much space as is needed.

## Strand 2: Fitness for purpose – how can statistics producers provide users with clear current information about the quality of the data/statistics to aid users’ choice and interpretation?

We heard from some users during our exploratory review that they were keen to have information upfront about whether the statistics were suitable for their own use. This may present important challenges for producers when considering the variety of uses and how to make the information available concisely and prominently. The key aspect of the statistics to be explained is the scale and nature of uncertainty.

Best Practice and Impact (BPI) Division of the Office for National Statistics has published [guidance](https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/policy-store/communicating-quality-uncertainty-and-change/) on communicating about uncertainty in which it says:

“A good understanding of sources and levels of uncertainty helps us to recognise how reliable numbers are. Communicating how well we can describe a specific outcome is critical to enable users to apply appropriate weight to the results of the analysis.”

The [Winton Centre for Risk and Evidence Communication](https://wintoncentre.maths.cam.ac.uk/projects/communicating-uncertainty/) has recommended two approaches, focusing on direct and indirect uncertainty:

*Direct*: uncertainty about the fact, number or scientific hypothesis. This can be communicated either in absolute quantitative terms, say a probability distribution or confidence interval, or expressed relative to alternatives, such as likelihood ratios, or given an approximate quantitative form, verbal summary and so on.

*Indirect*: uncertainty in terms of the quality of the underlying knowledge that forms a basis for any claims about the fact, number or hypothesis. This will generally be communicated as a list of caveats about the underlying sources of evidence, possibly amalgamated into a qualitative or ordered categorical scale.

[Source: van der Bles et al.[[1]](#footnote-2)]

We are joining with BPI to investigate these concepts further in relation to official statistics. We would welcome hearing your views about communicating uncertainty.

Focusing on your experiences within your organisation, you may find it helpful to consider the following questions:

1. Do you have any examples of measuring and displaying the uncertainty in estimates?
2. How can you summarise the strength of the evidence about fitness for purpose, for example, giving a professional judgement about the evidence compiled in methods and quality information about the five quality dimensions (relevance, accuracy and reliability, timeliness and punctuality, accessibility and clarity, comparability and coherence)?
3. How might the fitness for purpose statement account for different known uses?
4. Are there other ways you can suggest, to summarise the professional judgement to assist users?

Research Strand 2 Question: how can statistics producers provide users with clear current information about the quality of the data/statistics to aid users’ choice and interpretation?

Please provide your answer here – feel free to respond in relation to all or some specific questions, or to respond more broadly about the topic area raised in this strand. Use as much space as is needed.

## Strand 3: Value – how can we tell the national life story using National Statistics?

National Statistics at one level are the official statistics that have been determined by the regulator to comply with the Code of Practice for Statistics. It is the definition enshrined in legislation, in the [Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2007/18/part/1/crossheading/national-statistics).

Beyond this individual accreditation status, there is an alternative conceptualisation that has promise for users in terms of access to data and insight. In the early 1990s, the [Citizens Charter for open government](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/271975/2290.pdf) began the move towards greater transparency in public policy and said that official statistics “provide an objective perspective of the changes taking place in national life and allow comparisons between periods of time and geographical areas”[[2]](#footnote-3). Focusing on ‘national life’, and telling the national life story, may offer a helpful context for considering the greater value provided by National Statistics.

We are interested in considering whether the full suite of National Statistics is a pool of statistics that can help one understand key aspects of life in the UK. Another opportunity for realising the potential in the statistics would be to create a portal for data exploration by users, to make the National Statistics more accessible to users for their own use.

The notion of learning from the gathered pool of National Statistics raises some issues, such as the make up of the collection and how well they reflect UK national life today, and the relative pace of change.

We would welcome your perspective. As you consider the wider potential for telling the national life story, please reflect on these questions:

1. What is the purpose of the statistics you produce? Where does your organisation fit into telling the national life story?
2. What is in your collection of National Statistics?
3. Are they the statistics that represent the key statistics for telling your part of the national life story?
4. Are there important statistics missing from your National Statistics collection?
5. Are there any you think are less relevant to the national life story?
6. Do you see value in establishing a National Statistics collection/portal?
7. Is there value in including some official statistics and non-official statistics, including from outside government e.g. [Understanding Society](https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/), [British Social Attitudes Survey](https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/), in the collection of statistics to tell the national life story?

Research Strand 3 Question: how can we tell the national life story using National Statistics?

Please provide your answer here – feel free to respond in relation to all or some specific questions, or to respond more broadly about the topic area raised in this strand. Use as much space as is needed.

## Strand 4: Accountability – how can statistics producers show they are held to account?

We found in our exploratory review for the NS designation review that the public and users in our focus groups and roundtable discussions expect statistics producers to be held to account. They welcomed the role of the regulator and the scrutiny of National Statistics. There was a strong sense, however, that a public commitment or legal requirement to comply with the Code is not sufficient to reassure them that the standards are being applied.

Independent review may be conducted in a variety of ways. Within the academic world, peer review is a standard part of governance prior to publication. Audit, both internally and externally, is central to accountancy and corporate reporting. Compliance with standards can be verified at different levels – such as, within the organisation, by other independent professionals, by a regulator.

We would like to hear your views about how best to demonstrate accountability:

1. How do you show you are accountable?
2. How do you show that your statistics have been independently assessed and reviewed?
3. Would you be content to add a statement such as 'regulated by OSR' to the top of all official statistics releases?
4. What would you like to see OSR, as the statistics regulator, do more or do differently?
5. How can official statistics demonstrate compliance with the Code and their accountability be shown?

Research Strand 4 Question: How can statistics producers show they are held to account?

Please provide your answer here – feel free to respond in relation to all or some specific questions, or to respond more broadly about the topic area raised in this strand. Use as much space as is needed.

## Any further comments

Please use this space to provide any additional reflections about National Statistics not covered by the research questions.

## Next steps

Thank you so much for taking the time to consider these research questions and to provide your views. We welcome all comments and suggestions.

The project team will review the information gathered through the responses to this consultation paper, along with feedback raised through focus groups, discussion sessions and workshops in March 2021. We will meet with the project steering group to discuss the main messages we receive and then report to the UK Statistics Authority Board our reflections and recommendations and to determine any next steps. We will share the main findings from this review with the Heads of Profession for Statistics and publish a report on the OSR website.

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1. van der Bles AM, van der Linden S, Freeman ALJ, Mitchell J, Galvao AB, Zaval L, Spiegelhalter DJ. 2019 Communicating uncertainty about facts, numbers and science. R. Soc. open sci. <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/pdf/10.1098/rsos.181870> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Citizens Charter for Open Government, CM2290, para 2.27, page 12. London: HMSO [↑](#footnote-ref-3)