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**Mark Pont, Assessment Programme Lead**

Liz McKeown  
Director of Public Policy Analysis  
Office for National Statistics  
(by email)

6 August 2021

Dear Liz

**UK natural capital accounts**

As you are aware, we recently reviewed the Office for National Statistics (ONS) [UK natural capital accounts](#) against the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#).

Since ONS started to develop these statistics in 2011, and incorporated them into the UK Environmental Accounts last year, there has been a renewed interest in better recognising and valuing the benefits of nature and real public value in a publication that accounts for the often-intangible benefits these assets provide. ONS's [recent blog](#) accompanying the [Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence \(ESCoE\) paper](#) provided a really good example of the importance of good quality and insightful statistics on natural capital. Natural England's recent launch of the Environmental Benefits from Nature Tool (EBNT) and the publication of the [Dasgupta review](#) also highlight the benefits and importance of considering the impact on natural capital in decision making. This publication, as well as the wider set of natural capital publications, will be key to allowing natural capital to be accounted for in decisions, being required to both monitor progress and inform decisions, and it is important that they develop to maximise public value.

We found many positives in our review, particularly in the breadth of these statistics, which enhance their value and relevance to a wider range of users. These include:

- There is a high level of user engagement especially with academic and other technical users. For such a technical publication this is particularly good to see with current engagement focused on development of the next roadmap which will assess achievements so far as well as examine challenges and set priorities for upcoming work. When the next roadmap is published later this year, it will continue to demonstrate transparency by setting out how you plan to further develop these experimental statistics.
- Your team is carrying out promising work on improving data quality and reproducibility of analysis. To support this work, it would be worth speaking with Reproducible Analytical Pipeline (RAP) experts from the ONS Data Science Campus and the Data Quality hub. This will be beneficial for reducing the risk of human error and the need for corrections.

- Use of external experts for assurance purposes, particularly on some of the more uncertain but technical aspects such as the discount rate method, is a good approach as this improves both transparency and quality. Much of the publication is clear and insightful with the necessary caveats prominently described which provides guidance for users about how the statistics should be used.
- It is promising to see ONS and UKSA supporting the development of similar statistics in Pakistan and the possibility of further international work is very encouraging.

Our review identified several ways we consider you could further enhance the trustworthiness, quality and value of these statistics as they continue to develop:

- While user engagement is good there is scope to improve on this. For example, we would encourage you to produce and publish a user engagement strategy especially since this was requested by users as described in the [2020 roadmap](#). The strategy will encourage users to get involved and focus improvements where they are most useful and relevant for users.
- Engaging with non-academic users about the language used and its accessibility could help improve the publication for less-technical users. This again was an aspect flagged in the 2020 roadmap and it would be worth following up on all the user requests that were listed in this. Doing so may further improve the value and accessibility of the publication and improve transparency while ensuring users feel their concerns are being considered.
- There is potential to add further supporting information to the publication on aspects like choice of timescales, occurrences of negative asset values and assumptions made. This will add useful context and ensure the data can be fully interpreted and used. While there are brief descriptions of the 13 services and the three service groups it may be useful to pull these together and give a high-level description of the natural capital approach along with these to act as a primer for users.
- The statistics draw on an exceptionally diverse set of data sources, including official statistics and research. While you publish some useful information on the quality of data sources and the assumptions made, as well as the approach to assurance, it could be more centrally structured; currently it is discussed in the publication, the methodology report and previous roadmaps. It may be more valuable if it were in a single section which would allow easier reference by users. This would also improve trustworthiness by allowing users to view it as a cohesive set of information and thus gain a better understanding of any strengths and limitations. In addition, while limitations or assumptions are clearly marked the usefulness of this information could be enhanced by also describing the likely impact of these.
- Given the large number of data sources and assumptions made we encourage you to publish more information on uncertainty and sensitivity to assumptions. Caveats and assumptions are generally clearly flagged within the publication but with little consideration of the level of their effect on the data. Clearer explanation will give an indication of the potential variability and uncertainty in the figures and will help users interpret the statistics.

We understand that during the pandemic ONS has introduced new word limits for statistical publications and quality and methodology reports. For a topic as complex as natural capital, this limits the scope for detailed explanations for expert users. You may want to consider other means of publishing this detailed information, such as a separate report on data sources and quality, to ensure that it is available to users.

Thank you to your team for their positive engagement during this review: we look forward to continuing to engage with you and the team on these and other statistics and we hope that the work here helps inform the development of this publication as well as the more

detailed account publications. Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you would like to discuss any aspects of this letter further or if we can offer further assistance as these statistics continue to develop.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Pont', with a horizontal line underneath.

Mark Pont  
Assessment Programme Lead